

A Story About Chance (Novel Excerpt)

A Senior Honors Thesis

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by

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Opening

Why, hello there. Chance, at your service. I do mean that, at your service and disposal. I'll be your guide for the remainder of your reading.

Here's the rub, Bub:

Please feel free to ask questions at any point and time.

Not that I'll actually answer them in a timely fashion or way that you'll be able to understand. Actually, according to the setup, you can't possibly understand everything.

I don't mean to speak in such an uppity, dismissive tone but it's just the way things are. Your perspective is simply too small.

Frankly, even if you're reading this with the sand in your toes and a miniature umbrella in your drink on the beach, the Caribbean beach you've retired comfortably to from your illustrious career as Dean of Physics of MIT, where you beat out Jerome Isaac Friedman for deanship two years after he'd won the Nobel Prize for his work with quarks, a position which you served on after getting a doctorate for your ground-breaking work in Robotics at the Tokyo Institute of Technology where Shigeo Hirose, considered a pioneer in the field and now working with the United Nations to develop landmine clearing robots, cheated off your thesis paper, which all happened after you completed your undergraduate in mechanical engineering at the esteemed Cornell University, beating a certain William Sanford Nye in a fourth year particle physics course by three percentage points, a personal feat which causes you to secretly think his title as "The Science Guy" on a popular children's television program a little undeserved, yes, even if that is your unbelievable life station, you'd still be far too stupid.

You're still too *limited* to understand it.

And don't think I'm saying that because you would only be science smart. I'm not saying a language or literature type of genius would do the trick either. If T.S. Eliot were here, he'd still come well short of the intelligence we're looking for to understand all these things.

This shit would confuse Thomas Pynchon.

All these aforementioned names are way fucking smarter than me, Chance Williams, but they're all far too dumb for the benchmark genius we're looking for.

We're all too dumb.

Please ladies and gentlemen, don't get angry at me. I'm just the messenger. Those are the rules and I sure as hell didn't make them.

Now that you have a mild comprehension to the helplessness of your mental limitations, we can proceed with the story. Feel free to ask questions but do be patient with waiting for your replies. Like I said, even if you do receive an answer, it's unlikely you'll be able to comprehend it.

In fact, pages full of words are a perfect medium to use as a demonstration of this conundrum. These are the bare hard facts. It'll be much easier if you just accept them. You can ask as many questions as you like about the text, but no new words are going to magically pop up on the paper in response.

None.

You see, this is how the whole thing works really. You get these words, this story and nothing else. You can sit there all day wondering why Chance said this and what is the meaning behind that. I won't provide the answers. Any new ones at least.

I refuse.

So let's begin, shall we? (That's rhetorical. As if you had a choice in things. It's cute how we think we have choices and that we make decisions. I didn't see it at first but now I see how utterly ridiculous that notion is.)

I'm going to shoot straight with you. So I guess it would be more appropriate for me to say:

Let's begin.

The Money I Lost When I Bet On Daytime Talk Show Paternity Tests

Monday was supposed to be a good day.

I had gotten a call from my friend Lydia late Sunday night. She said in a dramatic voice, "Chance Williams?"

"Hey, Lydia," I said. "What's up?"

"Mr. Williams?"

"You called me, Lydia."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Williams, but this is not—what name was it that you said?—Lydia. This is..." There was a brief pause as she came up with a formal enough sounding name. "This is Vanessa Smithwick."

"Lydia, I've got caller ID."

"For fuck's sake Chance, just play along."

"Okay, okay. Yes, Mrs. Smithwick, this is Chance Williams."

"That's MISS Smithwick."

She said it with such a snotty air that I had to stop myself from apologizing to Vanessa.

"Chance, we'd like to inform you that an Violet Bennington is requesting you come on our tasteful program and prove for once and for all if you are her baby's father."

Normally, a guy isn't thrilled to hear about such things but I was an exception.

"Sweet," I said, "it's tomorrow?"

"Yep."

"They don't usually come on Mondays."

"I know. I checked the TV Guide twice though."

Had she informed my best friend and even better betting partner?

"You tell Al yet?"

"Just did," Lydia said. "Don't forget your money."

"I won't. See ya."

Violet is my girlfriend but she wasn't pregnant. This whole routine is something Lydia likes to do when she wants to let me know when *Maurycy*—our favorite talk show to watch during fifth period study hall—was going to have one of their infamous paternity test episodes the next day.

Al and I did what we do for every paternity test episode: gamble. Nothing high stakes, just our lunch money.

Lydia used to bet with us, the first couple times, but she stopped for a couple of reasons.

The first being that she's undeniably horrible with money. She blows it on concerts, movies, clothes, beer, pizza delivery, and whatever else you can possibly think of. It's not that those aren't fine things to spend your money on, but that's only if you got it.

You see, if Lydia had ten bucks, she'd spend twenty and ask you if she could borrow fifteen.

The other reason is that the three of us realized very early on in our betting that you need to handicap the bets in order to make them fair. Obviously, two willing bettors must wager money on opposite sides of each paternity test. And the more you watch Maury, the more you see some obvious situations where the dumbass with four teeth in his mouth who's been dragged on national television just is flat out going to be the father. There's only three of us in fifth period study hall who made it past basic algebra and we needed someone to handicap.

At first, Lydia wasn't too keen on the idea until we offered to dissolve her debts to us (which at the time came to \$33 total) and she only had to sign on to be the handicapper for one school year. We promised to find somebody else to do it by Senior year.

I stopped at the little convenience store Monday on the way to school. I bought a bag of BBQ chips because it was the cheapest thing I could find to buy to break the twenty dollar bill my mom had given me for lunch money. (The convenience store's proprietor gave me an earful one time I asked if he could open the register to give me change.) Plus, you can't really go wrong with BBQ chips unless they're stale. It's one of those staples where you pretty much always know what you're getting.

I saw Al's car pulling into a spot towards the back of the high school's student parking lot. I parked in the spot next to him.

"Got your singles ready?" he said before I was fully out of my car.

I flashed the small wad of money. Al nodded his approval.

We were late as usual, but Al called his coach—Al wrestles in the 132 pound weight class—to sneak us in the back doors by the old weight room that nobody uses.

"If it isn't the goddamn Bobbsey twins?" Coach Maynard greeted us as he slammed open the door.

Coach Maynard always had to make some little comment when he saw Al and me together. I can only conclude that he's secretly worried I would make Al quit wrestling or something, because he had tried pretty hard to recruit me last year. He wouldn't take no for an answer, always pestering me in the hallways with some macho bullshit. I didn't let him get the best of me though.

One day in particular, he yelled to me in the hallway, "Chance Williams, when you going to stop jerking off after schools? Be a man. Come wrestle."

"Oh, I forgot that spandex and group showers make a man," I said, giving him the finger.

Ever persistent, he simply said, "That's the kind of anger we could use."

Anyways, since then he's always seemed a bit uneasy with Al and me hanging out.

"When's the anniversary boys?" he said as the three of us walked through the abandoned weight room. "I seem to always forget how long you two love birds have been at it."

I've failed in my numerous attempts to get Al to pretend come out of the closet with me. I tried to convince Al that we could file a harassment lawsuit and get that poor bastard fired.

"Keeping up with your conditioning, Radford?"

"Five miles every morning," Al said. A blatant lie.

"Atta boy."

Al and I sat through Biology, pre-Calculus, British literature, and American history. I doubt we even paid attention to a single word about mitosis, polynomial functions, Chaucer, or carpetbaggers. Our thoughts were occupied with pregnant middle school dropouts, distraught

mamas, and a whole slew of potential daddies who were about to find out a great deal of their fates in front of a live studio audience and for our viewing pleasures.

Fifth period took forever to get to.

Lydia was waiting for us in the front of Mr. Berry's room. She had already set us three desks around the TV for the occasion. It was already turned to channel six. Some horrible soap opera—as if there's any other kind—was wrapping up.

"Hey, guys," Lydia said. "Did you know ex-President Bill Clinton is one shady motherfucker?"

"Yeah," Al said, "but don't mean he's one shady intern fucker?"

"No, everybody knows that."

"It's a national concern when somebody gets a couple BJ's," I said.

"Seriously, it's way more than that. Billy has had plenty of people *taken care of*."

"Another crazy theory about politicians being out to get us. You expect me to believe Bill Clinton is a cold blooded killer?" Al said before turning his attention to our pre-Calc teacher and oblivious study hall chaperone. "What's going on, Big Berry?"

Mr. Berry was grading a sizable stack of papers. Besides the times when he's actually lecturing, he seems to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He was surprised by our presence, which in itself isn't surprising. Sometimes he'll go the whole study hall without noticing any of us coming or going. It's really nice to be able to skip for an early lunch when it's one of those days you can't take the cafeteria food anymore. I swear the only way he knows when to start teaching is by the little alarm that goes off on his digital watch.

Really, you shouldn't expect anyone with that kind of digital watch to be paying attention to the world around them.

Once we even did a little experiment on Berry. It might have been a tiny bit cruel but nothing too unethical. It was a few months ago when Lydia's older sister, who was home on winter break from her second year at Kent State, told us about her intro Psychology class, specifically Pavlov and his famous dogs. We knew good ole Berry depended on his digital watch alarm to know when to start teaching, so we bought a cheap watch like his and set it off in study hall when he was knee-deep in lesson plans. He just got up without looking out at the actual desks, which of course were mostly empty, and he went right up to the chalk board and started into his lecture. Fifteen minutes later when the bell rang, we left him still in the middle of explaining logarithms.

"Oh," Mr. Berry said looking up, "hello Chance."

"How you doing?"

"I am a little distraught with this last test you guys took. Seems like we'll have to back track because not too many people are getting the concept as well as I'd like them to."

"I did," Al said confidently. There was some notable silence from Berry though. "Didn't I?"

His teacher instincts clearly didn't allow Berry to tell Al the plain truth and instead said, "We'll have to go over it again with everybody. Nobody seems to have gotten it. I'm sorry, guys, but I've got to get these papers done today."

"No worries," I said. "Good luck."

"You realize, Berry just said you were an idiot in so many words?" Lydia said to Al.

She gives him a hard time, even did when they were going out. Al was drawing in a big breath for a retaliatory comment when our show came on.

We all shut our traps and stared quietly in a way that is not totally unlike toddlers with Saturday morning cartoons or how my great grandmother shushes anybody who dares try to make small after dinner conversation when the six o'clock news is over. *The winning lottery numbers are being announced, moron.*

First up on today's show, talk show host extraordinaire Maury Povich began to tell us, we have Kacey who believes her former lover Leonard is the father of her two twin boys.

"This one's a straight up," Lydia said. She was saying this in her capacity as a handicapper.

A straight up is where there is only one potential father being tested. These are the simplest type of bets to figure out what'll be a fair bet because of the limited number of possibilities.

Two to be exact.

A guy can't be kind of the father, just the way a woman can't be 70% pregnant. You can be unsure, which is what today's show is all about, but when it comes down to it, our supreme talk show host is either going to say:

You are or you are not the father.

Then, as our procedures for betting dictate, Lydia listened to the story presented by Maury. After that, she would tell us the odds she's giving to this one potential baby daddy being the actual father. From there, Al and I pick our sides and pony up the cash.

Kacey says that Leonard left her for another woman, Cynthia, who he is currently engaged to. Kacey says Leonard and her were still intimately involved when Leonard began his current relationship with Cythia and this was the same time span that Kacey became pregnant with Timothy and Gregory.

A live video feed of a room backstage came on the big screen behind the classy Maury and the confused Kacey. The feed was of little Timothy and Gregory in matching sweatshirts, one blue and one green. Neither were clearly marked by the subtitles and your guess about which one was which is as good as mine. What I can tell you is that they looked like photo copies of each other.

The image of unsuspecting infants squirming in miniature hoodies caused the crowd to utter—quite predictably if you're a true fan of daytime talk shows as we are—*OOOs* and *AWWs* galore. The two boys were four months, according to the ambiguous subtitle, and were obviously surprised by their ability to move their own arms, but also, far from mastering the control gears to these arms.

Kacey, Maury continued, how positive are you that Justin is the father of your two boys?

You know, Maury, I have two babies so I'm 200% positive.

Mr. Berry's red pen, which had been writing over our failed tests in the basics of trigonometry, stopped for an instant, a half second tops, and then kept on going at the same furious rate. I'm pretty sure Lydia and Al didn't notice.

Kacey says that Leonard wouldn't be denying he's the father of four month Timothy and Gregory if Cynthia wasn't in Leonard's ear, feeding him what Kaceys believes are lies. This is what Leonard and Cynthia have to say on the matter.

The TV cut to a sequence of close ups, all shot at various angles and edited together for the most dramatic effect possible. All these close ups were shot in a blacked out room or in what must have been the studio's back alley. Cynthia and Leonard made what appeared to be their best *Don't Fuck With Us* faces for the mini-montage.

Then Leonard, with Cynthia by his side, glaring at the camera, gave his eloquent defense. It went like this:

Kacey says her kids are mine but she's just jealous 'cause she's jealous that I've moved on. She can't take that Cynthia and I are happy.

(This section was in the blacked out room. The next was shot with the engaged couple's backs to the brick wall.)

Maury, Leonard said pounding his fist into an open palm, I am 120% sure that I am not the father of Kacey's babies.

Again, Berry's scribbling on the paper mound ceased momentarily and this time his head tilted ever so slightly before he went back into his concentration.

She's slept with seven of my friends! Leonard added.

That he knows of, Cynthia said, deciding to make her presence known. All the while she was pointing at the camera for emphasis.

"Seven other dudes," Al said. "That's a lot of potential dads."

"Yeah, I guess so," Lydia said without removing her eyes from the screen.

Al's eyebrows came up about a quarter of an inch. He made eye contact with me. He was trying to rally some support, but I knew Lydia had not been the most selective with her sexual encounters. And I was, still am, happily with Violet. I also have no intention of ever shacking up with Lydia.

For these reasons, as far as I'm concerned, she can sleep with whomever and whatever number of guys she pleases without me ever once calling her the thing you never ever, ever say to a girl, even if you think she is and are completely sure of it.

It's pure suicide.

And I've seen Lydia's temper at its worst. I like Lydia as my friend. But more importantly, I'd like to keep my head attached to the rest of my body.

I nodded to Al saying in so many gestures: *Sorry buddy, but you're going to have to go this one alone.*

“What do you mean *you guess*?” Al said.

Lydia stopped watching the TV. She had realized the implication of Al’s words.

“I guessssssss” she said stretching out the term she’d be accusingly called on to clarify, “that I mean I could see how that could possibly happen. That’s all.”

“That’s all?”

“Yeah,” she said. “That’s all.”

“See this is exactly why I don’t ever want to have a daughter. You have a boy and you have to worry about one dick. Singular. Have a girl and you have to worry about every dick in the city. Plural.”

“Eloquently put, Al,” Lydia said.

“Some more plural than others,” Al said, looking right at Lydia. “Much more plural than others.”

Lydia began staring Al down. At that point, she had stopped blinking.

“Chill out, Al,” I said to prevent World War III from erupting in fifth period.

“Thanks, Chance,” she said, her eyes returning to the TV. The coast was clear.

Al was giving me a *What The Fuck* look. With Lydia’s focus back on Maury, I scrunched my eyebrows together to mimic exaggeration and I tried to show solidarity, so I mouthed the word “Seven” to him. His face relaxed and everything was cool.

To be honest, I really don’t have a real opinion on this but I told Al to relax to prevent Lydia slaughtering my best friend in study hall and pretended to be secretly shocked by the number seven because I was trying to push Al to a certain side of the wager.

(Dear reader, please don’t worry yourself silly about the math and betting jargon that follows shortly. No one knows better how quickly it gets treacherous losing yourself in the numbers behind decision making. But I’ve supplied the smaller details of the betting for those who’d like to play along at home.)

My line of reasoning was that Justin’s main argument seemed to be that he was happy with his current women, Cynthia. Whether his former lover, Kacey, was jealous of the new couple or not didn’t change the odds one bit on if he was the daddy.

Regardless, Justin seemed to be under a different impression.

Another thing: it’s important when you listen to others to pay attention to what they saying. But a lot of times, it’s more important to pay attention to what they’re not.

Note that Justin never once denied that he was sleeping with Kacey at the time she got pregnant. Even if there were seven other dudes all at the same time, he’d still be one in eight to be the father. Just going off my gut, I didn’t feel Justin’s sources would be totally reliable so there was a good possibility she had slept with other dudes way before or way after she got pregnant.

His whole thesis statement to Maury that he was 120% showed he had no basis in objective statistics. Grant it, Kacey said that she was 200% positive but she had an ounce of reasoning behind her fictitious percentage, namely having two babies that she was each 100% positive about.

I still haven’t the slightest clue where 120% came from.

Let’s bring out Justin and Cynthia.

Cynthia came out screaming at Kacey the whole way on stage, saying, *You’re a home wrecking whore.*

Justin apparently felt left out and verbally supported his fiancé with the less prepared addition of the plain old **Whore!**

There was a brief attempt for physical violence by both parties that was easily prevented by the show's trained security guards.

"All right," Lydia said. "One to three that Justin is the daddy."

Translation:

If I think that Justin is the dad and Al thinks he isn't, then I put up one dollar and Al puts up three. If Justin is the dad, then I would win Al's three dollars and if Justin is not the dad, then Al wins my one dollar.

And see, Al had already showed me his hand by that exasperated mention of seven other potential baby daddies and so I did what you do when you know you're opponent's already made up his mind: push for better odds.

"Seven dudes," I said in my best imitation of an potential consumer on a car lot trying to gain leverage. I was pointing out the creaky passenger door hinge and the loose muffler. I was kicking the tires and shaking my head. "Seven other dudes...that we know of."

It may be important to note here that you're allowed to negotiate better odds right up until the handshake or until Maury's "You are (not) the father." Whichever comes first.

There was another short break of bleeped out screaming and threats of violence that would not ever come to fruition. After which, I gave Al my offer.

"Give me one to five that Justin is the father and I'll bet that he is the father."

Without hesitation, he agreed.

To him, this bet was good because he thought it was a one in eight shot that Justin was the father (Justin and the Seven Other Dudes). To me, this bet was a good bet because I figured that there were probably less than the supposed seven who were having sex with this woman at the time of conception.

The three of us in study hall watched the three of them on television being irate. Maury, who at first was patient with his arms folded had watched in a resigned fashion, eventually got impatient with his guests bickering so he did the classy thing—as Maury always does—and calmly cut in front of the circus to grab the Results envelope from the producer. The charming Cynthia, who had seemed to be only capable of saying a few words over and over and over (those being the nouns: Home, Wrecker, and Whore), shut up and sat down along with Kacey and Justin.

Justin, the DNA test to determine whether or not you are the father of four month old Timothy and Gregory is back. Justin, you are not the father.

"Fuck," was (and still is) all I have to say in that regard.

Al gave a small fist pump.

"You should have stuck with my odds," Lydia said with a shrug.

The news caused Justin and Cynthia to pop out of their seats. Cynthia had discovered a new word to say.

See! See! See!

Justin started dancing. I'll admit he had some good moves. He finished the celebration off with a back flip that received more cheers from the crowd.

I stuck my hand out with a crisp one dollar bill and Al snatched it up. To rub in the victory, he pretended to count it which, of course, Berry looked at with confusion.

The Perfect Fast Food Meal

The way I always rationalize any lost bet I suffered was that no matter what happened I got to watch a crazy story. Each missed bet meant something crazy occurred that I didn't see coming. It isn't educational and it may cost me my lunch money from time to time, but if nothing else, it's entertainment.

"Oh, I forgot to ask," I said during the commercial break. "How was the show Saturday night?"

Azimuth Dream is a local band that we all agree is going to blow up and become huge any time. They're too talented not to. Azimuth had the weekend before this study hall. I didn't go to it because Uncle Donny was having a cookout. I regret missing the show but I would have regretted missing my uncle's ribs more. Plus, Al and I had already attempted to see them last time they were around in December.

Attempted being the key word.

"Amazing," Lydia said. "Dude, I didn't think it was possible, but they sound even better than that LP we got."

Al was silent. We both looked at him as he pretended to watch two commercials, one for electrician's college and the other for a debt consolidation program complete with computer software. Two things that the sixteen-year-old Al had no real interest in.

"Yeah, Al," Lydia said. "What'd you think of that show?"

"What? Oh," Al said pretending this was the only thing he had heard. "Oh, yeah, I thought they sounded good."

"They did sound really good. How descriptive of you. What's you think of the new song they tried out?"

"It was—uhh—incredible. Like classic Azimuth Dream but a whole other direction for them at the same time."

I had seen this before. It's called the Nature channel.

I was watching Lydia skillfully set her trap. She was sitting in the watering hole with a mouth full a sharp teeth waiting for the unsuspecting wildlife to take a drink of the cool water. Al was the dough eyed antelope, unfortunately thirsty. I wanted to scream "Run to safety!" but the desire to watch this unfold was stronger.

"I thought," Lydia continued, "it was an excellent choice for them to play 'Cinematic Sleep' for the encore."

Al nodded slowly, perhaps starting to feel the danger but not yet able to identify it.

"Wouldn't you say that was an incredible song for them to end on?"

"Sure, Cinematic was a strong note to end such a great show on."

"I completely agree."

She smirked at Al. It was alarming how genuine it looked. The predator was releasing the prey for a few moments, toying with it, before the final pounce.

He went back to watching a commercial for a bathroom cleaning product or something of that sort. Lydia looked over and gave me a grin that still makes me want to shudder.

"What was your favorite part of the new song?"

Al was a bass guitarist. His fondness for bass lines was well documented.

"The bass, of course."

Wrong answer, Al.

"You always do love the bass," Lydia said. "Thing is, Al, that Azimuth Dream did play a new song but it was only the guitarist playing an acoustic. And they opened with Cinematic Sleep. There was no encore. They had to cut it short because the singer was too fucked up on something to finish the set."

Al looked back over to me. She had a tight hold of him in her jaws. He was looking at me, desperately, in that split second before those rows of teeth clamp down.

"All this son of a bitch does is lie. Why'd you miss it this time? Still too busy grabbing the Perfect Fast Food Meal?"

"Jesus, that was one time."

Allow me to explain the Perfect Fast Food Meal. As previously mentioned, Al wrestles and has the appetite of a overweight tiger. You know how some people have a Sweet Tooth? Well my friend Al's got a Deep Fried Tooth. He could be a majority stock owner by now of multiple companies with how much money he's given to McDonald's, Burger King, and every other place where the employees ask you if "you want fries with that?" One day out of boredom and far too much free time, Al drove around to various fast food joints assembling what he calls the Perfect Fast Food Meal.

Here is an incomplete list of what goes into the PFFM:

There's a Big Mac from McDonald's, fries from Burger King, a cheesy burrito from Taco Bell, breadsticks from Pizza Hut, a frosty from Wendy's, and, believe it or not, an item or two that I'm forgetting.

When Al and I had tried to see Azimuth Dream play in December, their second time in the greater Cleveland area and only fifth second show in all the Midwest, we didn't make it.

Let me clarify that. We did not make it to the Azimuth Dream show because of the PFFM.

We had left Al's house with a little over an hour before they were suppose to come on stage. From Al's, the trip to the Grog Shop was twenty minutes tops. We had plenty of time. Too much as it turned out.

Al passed up the highway onramp. "Going to grab a Big Mac before we get going."

I didn't object because we really did have boatloads of time. A few minutes later, Al was about halfway through with his double cheeseburger when we passed up the same highway entrance again."

This time he said, "Forgot how much I hate their fries. They're way too soggy. I'm going to grab a large fry from Burger King."

And I didn't want to make a big stink when the show was still fifty minutes away, but you know how this one goes, don't you?

I've managed to block out most of this traumatic experience out but I do remember, very clearly, that we were on our way to Wendy's so Al could get a frosty for dessert when Azimuth Dream went on. I also remember we got inside the Grog Shop just as the lead singer said, "Thank you Cleveland! You've been great," and walked off stage.

"So what happened this time?" Lydia said. "Get caught up in the Taco Bell drive-thru?"

"One time! One time I did that. You never could drop anything."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

“You know exactly what that’s supposed to mean. Anyways, the Perfect Fast Food Meal is not what happened. I’ve been worn out from everything going on lately.”

“You overslept the Azimuth Dream show?” I said.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said. “I know it’s bad.”

“But I saw your car in the parking lot,” Lydia said.

“Technically, I made it to the show.” He sighed. “Or at least the Grog Shop’s parking lot.”

I was disgusted.

“You’re telling me you had tickets to see Azimuth Dream in person, for the second time and at one of our favorite venues no less, but still fell sound asleep in the parking lot of the venue?”

He pleaded for us not to talk about it anymore. How could we drop it though?

“Aaron and I had a great time at the show while you were busy catching ZZZs in your backseat.”

“How many times are you going to bring up stuff about Aaron. It’s always: Aaron and I did this and Aaron and I did that.”

“Jealous much?” Lydia said.

“No, not jealous,” Al said. “Bored about hearing every little idiotic thing you and Aaron do. I don’t need to hear about every time you wipe his butt.”

“You said you wanted to be friends. Friends tell each other things about their lives. Aaron is a part of my life whether you like it or not.”

The Maury show returned from commercial break before things escalated too badly. We got ready to enjoy the next tale of paternity woe.

Now we have 21 year old Haydee who wants to find out who is the father of her one month old.

The subtitle read:

1 BABY, 3 DIFFERENT MEN... IS ONE MY BABY’S FATHER?

This one would be interesting.

“I might be able to see how there are two guys,” Al said. “A girl gets dumped, rushes things with the next guy. Three though, is a bit harder to explain, right?”

Lydia failed to hold back her grin. “I guess.”

Al grumbled something inaudible.

Haydee, before you were pregnant you were... hooking up with people?

Detective Maury had cracked another unsolved mystery.

Yeah, said Haydee.

But what happened as soon as you found out you’re pregnant?

I changed everything the day I found out I was pregnant, the day I got the test. Immediately. I have to live for my daughter now because she's the number one thing in my life.

"So we've got a Three-Way May Day," Lydia said. Another type of bet.

"Two for One?" I said.

"Yeah, probably."

A Two for One is where one of us takes the most likely candidate and the other gets the other two potential daddies.

"These subtitles are profound."

At the bottom of the screen, it read: HAYDEE SAYS IT WAS A MISTAKE SLEEPING WITH 3 MEN & NOT KNOWING WHO FATHERED HER BABY.

I have sometimes sat in study hall wondering how one gets that job of writing these poetic snippets for Maury's subtitles.

So first you thought it was Ray, Maury said. Then you thought it was the 3rd guy. Then when baby Lynn was born you thought it might be Edwin.

I know it's messed up, Haydee said.

"No shit, Captain Obvious," Al said.

I can understand the type of person you've turned into, Maury said. You ought to be proud of yourself. I understand you've come to apologize. To whom?

I want to apologize to them, Ray and Edwin. I'm sorry to put them through this confusion.

"Yeah, this'll be a Two for One."

The video to introduce the two guys who actually showed up the show's taping. After the same dramatic close-up montage that we'd already seen, the first shot of Ray stayed on the screen.

My name is Ray and I'm the first man tested for Haydee's baby.

Then another somber face came on the TV.

I'm Edwin and I'm the second guy tested for Haydee's baby. I knew she was pregnant but never connected the fact that I could be the father.

"Hi," I said. "I'm Chance and I'm the thirteenth guy test for Haydee's baby."

"My name is Lydia and I'm the fourteenth guy tested for Haydee's baby."

"I'm Allen. I'm fifteenth guy tested for Haydee's baby. Being real with you, I didn't even enjoy having sex with Haydee so I'm 352% sure I ain't the daddy."

Mr. Berry couldn't take the preposterous math anymore.

"Al, I think you might seriously need to be tutored. It is impossible to be 360% sure of something like that."

"Oh no, I was just—"

"Honestly," Berry said. "I don't even see where you'd come up with such a number. Meet with me after 7th period."

Al tried in vain to get out of this but the joke was completely lost on Mr. Berry. It didn't help Al's case that he had done bad on the test Berry was grading.

"I told you he thinks you're an idiot," Lydia said.

Al's eyes shot daggers but she could have cared less.

Now, Maury said, regaining our full attention, the third man has been tested even though he's not here today. So Haydee is going to get the answer she wants.

This statement's irony only made itself clear after the fact.

I want to read to you, Haydee, what the third guy had to say.

An image of a black cartoon-like silhouette with a big red question mark showed up on the big screen, a bit unnecessary in my opinion.

Although I feel like I would never reject a child, I didn't know somebody can be pregnant for ten and a half months with your child, especially when I wore a condom. I do not think this child is mine. That's what he said, Haydee.

The crowd booed right on cue.

"Okey dokee," Lydia said, assuming her part in our ritual. "This is a Two for One, even money. Ray is the One, Edwin and the Mystery Man are the Two."

Hear me out. The info suggested that Ray and Edwin were both equally likely to be the daddy. 50-50. When you add in Mystery Man into the equation, this tilts the scales and makes the Two bet even better, because the Mystery Man sweetens one side (Edwin's) which you already figure is 50-50.

Al and I shook on it as Maury grabbed the Results envelope. We put three bucks on this one.

In the case of one month old Lynn, the anonymous man who didn't want to come on today's show is NOT the father.

The crowd cheered as the bad guy was out of the picture and Al clapped along with them. He didn't clap because he didn't like the Question Mark man. He clapped because his bet had gotten a little bit sweeter. Still, I had made the right bet, and at that point, it was either Ray or Edwin for even money.

Also, it should be noted here that if you look closely enough there are signs. For instance, with paternity tests that have multiple potential daddies Maury will almost never reveal the positive test until announcing the negative results first.

It's TV 101: keep the audience in suspense for as long as possible.

So when Maury said the following:

In the case of one month old Lynn, Ray...

Al said, "Shit," knowing Ray was not the dad. He handed me his three dollars.

Ray wiped back some tears and put his head in his hands. The crowd *AWW*'d the good guy.

I was in the middle of a victorious fist pump when Maury said, **In the case of one month old Lynn, Edwin, you are NOT the father.**

"Holy shit," I said. Al snatched the three bucks out of my hand which was stopped in its fist pumping tracks.

The crowd went OOOOOO in disbelief. Haydee ran off the stage with her hand covering her eyes. Maury followed her backstage and found Haydee crying on a couch.

This is not an uncommon reaction of women who get all negative paternity tests. I understand their embarrassment, but if they've done their Maury research, then they'd know there are cameraman whose job it is to run backstage on such occasions.

"Holy shit is right," Al said.

Any readers who may find themselves coming on such a type of show, I urge you to make sure to test ALL the potential baby daddies.

As an experienced Maury Paternity Testing Day Viewer, I am able to tell you that a triple Not-The-Father is a rare thing. It's not entirely unheard of for there to be three or more negative results, but usually a woman concerned enough to put her personal business all on national TV is detail oriented enough to make sure all the potential daddies are subjected to the testing.

Another commercial break came on. The three of us sort of stared at each other until Al summed it up and simply said, "That's got to be embarrassing."

"So everybody's heard about Monica Lewinsky but does anyone remember Mary Mahoney?"

"Again with the Clinton nonsense?" I said.

"Hear me out," Lydia said. "This Mahoney girl was good-looking 25 year old White House intern in 1997 which was prime time for—"

"Ole' Billy boy getting action in the Oval Office," Al said.

"Exactly. Mary Mahoney was working at the Georgetown Starbuck's coffee shop at the same time. One day when she's cleaning up after close with two other coworkers and some gunmen decide to come in and kill the three execution style. The poor girl ends up with five bullets in face, chest, and the back of her head. The cops say it's a robbery but there was still \$4,000 in the Starbuck's the next morning."

"You think she had an affair with him?"

"I'm saying it seems like a lot of trouble if you're going to rob a Starbuck's."

The third and final paternity test of the episode came back on. Our talks of worldwide conspiracies and New World Orders was postponed. The subtitle now read:

IS MY HUSBAND OR HIS BROTHER MY BABY'S FATHER?

(I was down seven dollars. Monday was supposed to be a good day but please do not think that my gambling debt was the reason that Monday went all wrong. On the contrary, right here is where it all went wrong. The segment between the second and third commercial breaks to be exact.)

This mini tale of confused paternity was a bit unique in the sense that the mother was trying to prove that her brother-in-law was not the father of her child. Yes, she admitted, she had sex with the brother-in-law a few times but she was positive he wasn't the proud papa.

How positive one might ask?

In the mother's own words, she was "not 100%, 200%" but, in fact, no less than "5000% sure that he (i.e. the brother-in-law she slept with a few times) is not the father."

Berry—who's idea of living on the edge is going to bed without flossing—looked dangerously close to have an aneurism.

Mr. Berry said in disbelief, "What school did these people graduate from?"

The short answer is: Nowhere.

We tried to assure him that we knew this was not real math. Our attempts were semi-successful.

This kid named Julian came in from the hallway towards the end of us trying to lower Mr. Berry's blood pressure. Besides Al, Julian's probably the only other guy on the wrestling team that has an IQ in the double digits. Julian sat down on top of the desk behind Al. He was investigating what had captured our attention.

"Paternity testing day?" Julian said.

"Yep" Lydia said.

"Who is up in the betting?"

"Not I," I said.

Al grinned and flashed his small bundle of newly won singles. It should be noted that the three of us did not bother to look away from the television during all of this.

"What's the woman on the TV holding up?" Julian asked.

"Airbrushed tee-shirt."

The woman on TV held up the shirt by its shoulders for the camera. It had elaborate gold block letters. It read: TERRY, YOU ARE NOT THE FATHER!

At the very least, you've got to give the woman credit for coming prepared. Had there been any deaf people watching at home or some people watching this show at a loud restaurant, there was no need for closed captioning to understand what her opinion was.

Do you think they look alike? Maury asked.

The big screen directly behind the stage put a side-by-side of Terry and the baby's pictures.

Ray Charles could see that my baby don't look like him.

For anyone who may not be aware of who Mr. Ray Charles is, the only vital information you need to know to appreciate this woman's comment was that Mr. Ray Charles is an extremely accomplished musician who is blind.

“Well that’s not very nice,” Lydia said.

“I like that she’s still holding up the shirt,” Al said. “We get it lady: You don’t think Terry is the dad.”

“So why are you here?” I said to Julian.

“Making a delivery,” he said. “Actually, this note is for you. You’re getting called down to the office.”

“Someone must have seen us sneak in late this morning,” Al said. “Hope we didn’t get Coach in trouble.”

“Who cares about that asshole? Fuck him. I’m worried about us,” I said. “Want to walk back with me at commercial break, Julian?”

“Actually, it says to come down immediately. Sorry, I didn’t see that before, got too caught up in the airbrushed shirts.”

He passed me the note and at the bottom of it, in the secretary’s big bubbly handwriting, it said:

BRING THINGS DOWN. LEAVING FOR THE DAY.

It hadn’t quite hit me yet but I knew something was up. This wasn’t some punishment for coming to school late. The maximum punishment for that is afterschool detention. And the note was to go down to the main office, not the assistant principal’s. The main office isn’t where suspensions occur. The assistant principal’s office is the one where people get suspended.

“You sure Al didn’t get called down too?” I said.

“Why are you trying to throw me under the bus?” Al said.

“I’m not, really, I just don’t know why I’m getting called down, especially to the main office. It says I should be ready to go home.”

“I’m pretty sure it isn’t a punishment thing,” Julian said.

He was trying to be reassuring, but right here is where I began to piece together the puzzle. The puzzle that every particle in me did not want to solve.

“C’mon,” Julian said. “Don’t be worried. Let’s get going though.”

As I was getting up, Maury had revealed Terry was not the father after all. He looked mute and totally dejected as his sister-in-law (with benefits) hit him repeatedly in the head with the airbrushed tee-shirt. His life had changed forever and instead of yelling some profanities at the crowd or running offstage, Terry sat there blank faced.

I got Al to grab all my homework. Lydia told me to call her after school. Julian and I left Mr. Berry’s room. We were going down the South hallway, which is all glass, when I looked into the parking lot and saw a beige sedan.

I thought: Is that my Uncle Donny’s car?

I don’t think that Julian even noticed that I didn’t say a word the rest of the way to the main office. He was talking about one of the dozen things he had to do after school. Well, I guess he could have noticed and kept talking anyways.

We walked into the office and there was my uncle standing. He’s a real friendly guy but he didn’t say anything. He looked at me without blinking. My mind forced me to see what it had pieced already pieced together since leaving study hall:

My grandmother had just lost her seven year struggle with Alzheimer’s disease.

Strangers

On Thursday, my family and I found ourselves in sitting in the first two rows of a church on the day of a funeral.

The place where nobody wants to be.

I was sitting to the right of my mother, her name is Robin, and to the left of my girlfriend, Violet. Violet and I are in love, both our first times. The three of us get along quite well. My grandfather, Fred, was sitting off to the left and in front of my mom. And next to my grandfather was his only son, Jeffrey, and next to Jeffrey was Cheryl, my aunt. Next to Cheryl and in front of Violet was my uncle Donny, Cheryl's husband.

In the open casket in front of us, lay the body of Marlene Williams. Marlene is (was?) the wife of Fred, the mother of Robin, Cheryl, and Jeffrey. She was (is?) the mother-in-law of Donny and the grandmother of me, Chance.

For those of you lucky enough not to know already, avert your eyes and scroll down a couple paragraphs if you care not to know, which I don't blame you one bit because I wish I didn't, but Alzheimer's is a vicious disease. It erased all of Marlene's memories. My grandmother's memories of her entire life, of her own wedding, of her children's names, of how to use her vocal chords, or how to swallow food, and on.

And on.

And on.

They've all been discarded by Alzheimer's.

It's a particularly malicious disease to all parties involved because it makes strangers out of families. It discards all the things that make a person a person. I am young and stupid but don't be confused for one fraction of a second: I love my grandmother.

But those last two years of the "end" stage of the disease forced me to come to a realization:

Marlene had been dead for some time before the funeral. The person we loved was never coming back. No one in my family said it aloud but we all came to discover this fact in our own ways. All that was left was Marlene's body.

And, as of that Monday, Alzheimer's discarded that too.

I was looking around at the other pews and recognized a few of my grandmother's old friends here and there. They were sprinkled through the many faces. My Uncle Jeff pointed out various people in the line that led to Marlene's casket at the wake the day before.

He told me things like, "That's grandpa's cousin Herbert" and "That's your great-aunt Georgina."

Jeff called these people extended family. I called them something that seemed more fitting: strangers.

My uncle and I stood there shaking hands with the strangers in the most impersonal of manners. It was as if we were local politicians soliciting votes from a nursing home crowd or insurance salesmen trying to sell policies to middle-class office workers.

It was disgusting.

My uncle told me to be respectful.

I tried my best to be.

Lazy Speechwriter

The church organ stopped playing. The priest rose from an adjacent pew and shook my grandfather's hand.

Father Larry is the Catholic priest of my grandparents' church, Saint Rita's. It is the church where Fred and Marlene were married thirty odd years ago. It is the same church which Robin, Cheryl, and Jeff were made to attend mass every Sunday until they were adults. It became the church where my grandmother's funeral was held that Thursday.

Father Larry began reciting a speech he had prepared for the occasion. There was something off about it though, something I couldn't quite put my finger on for the first couple minutes.

Then, it hit me.

The speech being delivered had all the emotion and procedure of a Madlib. If you haven't had the immense pleasure, allow me to enlighten you. Madlibs is a game my friends and I played in elementary school. English teachers encourage their students to play this game. To play, you've only got to know your nouns and verbs and adjectives and other grammatical whatnots. Any given Madlibs game requires the participant to provide various random words according to which parts of speech they are.

You simply insert the linguistic spare parts into a previously incomplete paragraph. Below, I've provided an example.

Marvin went to the **monkey cage** after work
(noun; name) (noun; place)

to purchase **49,782** pounds of **lovely**
(large number) (adverb)

Nicaraguan **pure** **crack cocaine**. Then,
(noun; country) (adjective) (noun; object)

Marvin went home to show relatives the
(previous name)

purchase. They were so **ecstatic** and
(adjective; positive feeling)

Great Aunt loved it the most. They demanded more
(noun; relative)

crack cocaine, **Marvin** ! They cried, "We
(previous object) (previous name)

want more! We *need* more!”

Please don't think that Madlibs necessarily has to be so adult-oriented. I just get bored and find the drug content makes the game more interesting.

Father Larry was reciting words to our sincerely devastated gathering that he did not write.

Below is the beginning of Father Larry's speech.

Today we are here for the **funeral** of our
(noun; occasion)

beloved friend, **Marlene**. **She** is our
(noun; name) (pronoun; gender)

Sister as are all your children, God. But
(noun; sibling, sex specific)

we are glad to **know** that
(verb; bullshit reassurance)

Marlene is in a better place now with you in
(previous name)

Heaven, Almighty Father.

In the second row, I was steaming and completely infuriated that this lazy fucking asshole couldn't come up with a genuine speech about the person lying stone cold dead ten feet away. My eyes began scanning the faces around me to see if anybody had also realized Father Larry had inserted my grandmother's name into this prefabricated and sterile eulogy.

My aunt Cheryl began crying uncontrollably at the words, but it was not from the same infuriation as her nephew. She was really sad. Cheryl was actually moved by Father Larry's words.

We are sure **she's** in
(pronoun; gender, possessive contraction)

a better place now, in Heaven with you Almighty

Father.

Cruel Comment

Wednesday at my grandmother's wake, Jeff and I were standing there beside the casket, opposite the line still shaking hand with strangers, shaking hands with our extended family.

Within the first 4 people, I couldn't believe my ears. I heard one of the most inappropriate things you could conceive of at a funeral.

The first time, it came from Jeff's favorite cousin, Danny Whitsburg. His eyes were full of tears. In retrospect, he was a good actor. He shook both our hands with that sympathetic, I'M HERE FOR YOU way with both hands clasped around each of ours.

Danny said, "Marlene was a wonderful person. You were lucky to have such a caring grandmother. (He was looking at me when he said this.)

"You were lucky to have such a great mother. (He was looking at Jeff when he said this.)

"I am thankful to have had such an incredible aunt."

Jeff and I agreed with him. What kind things for Danny to say?

It makes me very happy to this day to think of all the women in the world—all the Ethels, Rosemarys and Berthas—and to know that I was lucky enough to get a Marlene. And this particular Marlene. This one so full of love that I was the fortunate recipient of.

Danny could have stopped there, should have stopped there. Those were plenty of kind words for Jeff and me. He kept going though.

"Alzheimer's is a horrible disease."

We agreed. However depressing, it was a terribly true thing for him to say. Nobody could argue with that.

And that would have been enough too, but Danny didn't stop right there. Why he thought it was a good time for a joke then and there is still beyond me.

He said, "You know, **[insert cruel comment too inappropriate to say here.]**"

I was shocked at his audacity. What a horrible thing to say at such at my own grandmother's funeral?

The worst part about it was that Jeff smiled and agreed with the fucker.

Marlene's own son!

How could he?

Mysterious Injuries and What Chance Has Heard About God

I was getting pretty restless trying subdue my rage over Father Larry's speech. You have to pick your battles. I had already used up my act of craziness in defense of my grandmother's name the day of the wake. There's only so many times that you can get publicly violent, even at your own grandmother's wake and funeral, before the authorities have to get involved and while I did what I did on Wednesday out of my love for Marlene not everyone here knew my motivations.

None of them heard what that familial traitor whispered in my ear.

My grandma meant very much to me and the rest of this pitiful people in the first two rows of Saint Rita's church. 17 years ago she was a living, breathing, loving grandmother giving tours to whatever poor strangers were nice enough to come in the Robinson's Memorial Hospital to the hospital bed of her daughter, Robin, and her newly born grandson, Chance. Eight years

ago, she was a healthy, active senior citizen who had recently retired and who frequently enjoyed relieving friends and family of whatever cash was in their wallets at the card table.

Then six years ago, Marlene was a woman who occasionally forgot she had brewed a full pot of coffee and sometimes left the TV on in the bedroom before turning one on in the living room. Four years ago, she would put the phone down in the middle of a conversation and start reading a book in the other room before a daughter or a son came frantically over thinking she'd collapsed. Two years ago, my grandmother was a woman who would look at her family with no recognition of faces. This included a face she had married, and others she given birth to.

On that Sunday, Marlene had a pulse.

Then some piddily little Monday comes along and she's a body in an open casket at Saint Rita's church.

Now, my grandmother is only a memory and even those don't always last. Alzheimer's can take them, if it wants. It can take any of them it pleases.

It usually takes them all.

I tried to focus on the stained glass window with its picture of the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus. It was assembled from seemingly a million little bits of colored glass of all shapes and sizes carefully arranged to make one picture. Besides the aesthetic beauty of the thing, I don't know if this is intentional or why they are so common in churches but the stained glass window mosaics seem to demonstrate the appeal of religion.

You see, you've got all this small tiny fractured and fucked up jagged little pieces of glass that are dangerous and nothing special individually, but they all come together for this common purpose (i.e. worshipping the son of God) and the final product is a beautiful image of what has brought all the little messed up pieces here in the first place.

To be completely honest, before my grandmother's funeral and trying to hold back some of the pain that eventually would come, that is still going on, and that will surely persist until I become my own memory, I hadn't really had much concern for God. God had about as much to do with my seventeen year old life as retirement funds.

I understood both were of much importance to others, but neither had any significant effect on the practical day to day of life.

In conversations I had in the days following my grandmother's funeral, my research found these to be the answers provided by Christians I know.

Q: What does God know?

A: He knows everything.

Q: How good is God?

A: He is infinitely good.

Q: What can God do and what can't he do?

A: He can do anything. God is the most powerful being in the universe.

Q: How do you know God is a he?

A: [Varied:]

Christian X: Because the Bible says so.

Christian Y: It supports the father metaphor for God to the human race.

Christian Z: I don't know. I can't really think of God as having a penis. (Short

pause) But, really, a vagina is equally hard to picture on the Almighty.

My aunt Cheryl was sobbing. It was loud enough to cause Father Larry to stop his speech but he wasn't mad. Nobody was mad at her. The woman had just lost her mother. Violet began to cry and she grabbed my hand for comfort. Reflexively, I pulled my hand back with the sudden rush of pain.

"Sorry," Violet said between sniffles. "I forgot."

"Don't apologize," I said and put my arm around her.

That Thursday was a sad day.

Marlene accepted Christ into her life and
(noun; name)

now Christ will accept **Marlene** into Heaven with
(noun; name)

Him.

Unlucky No. 184

About an hour into the wake, Jeff and I had worked our way through most of the line that had come to pay their respects to Marlene. At this point, we had shaken somewhere north of 250 hands.

When I had heard Danny utter those unspeakable words, I had basically been too shocked to say anything. But it got worse. He wasn't the only one to say it. By now, we'd heard the same atrocious statement/cruel comment 183 times by my count. I had begun to think that somebody who was extraordinarily malicious towards our family was instructing people before they came in to say this tasteless thing to rub salt in the wound. Thoughts of a sinister looking guy wearing a cape and twisting his mustache as he put money in these visitors' pockets flooded my brain.

What a horrible thing to say on such a sad day?

And Jeff still hadn't said anything back to these people. There was nothing in his expression that showed the slightest bit of offense. I couldn't believe that he was agreeing with them. I didn't care anymore if you are our dear 85 year old Aunt Geraldine from the old country. No longer was I going to let you continue saying those vulgar things at my grandmother's wake. Such indecent things and we were only 14 feet from the open casket where Marlene's dead body laid.

I had made up my mind that maybe I had been able to keep quiet—be respectful, like I had promised Jeff—the first 183 times but the 184th person to say the cruel comment was going to be pretty sorry they had pressed their luck on the day of Marlene's wake.

Numero 184 was going to seriously regret trying to crack a joke that Wednesday.

When I made this promise to myself that my great-aunt, Jeff's aunt, and Marlene's sister was next up in line. Laverne.

I was convinced that Laverne wouldn't say it though. This was her sister's wake, granted Marlene and Laverne weren't the closest of sisters but I didn't believe my great-aunt to be any sort of devil.

Laverne knelt before the casket for a few minutes. Lovingly, she touched Marlene's hand. She crossed herself, and then, she walked towards us. My uncle reminded me in a quiet but

serious tone that despite the fact that my grandmother hadn't gotten along perfectly with her sister, Laverne had as much a right to grieve as we did.

"There is no excuse to be rude," he said.

"Okay," I said. "Respectful, I got it."

I really tried to be.

Aunt Laverne had made it to where Jeff and I were standing. She hugged me first and then Jeff.

She said, "I can't believe she's gone."

"I know," we said.

"I'm so sorry for you boys."

Like we hadn't heard this bit before? I reminded myself that she was like all the others lulling us into a false sense of security.

Comedians setting up their punch lines.

I was determined to keep my guard up against another relative's sweet words. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me 183 times, shame on me.

"Marlene was my sister so we had gotten to spend much more time together than you two ever did. That always bothered me because we weren't that close. At least not as close as you two were to her."

Jeff looked touched by her words. I maintained the disposition of an Old West gunslinger, untrusting and ready to draw my gun at the drop of a hat. Attentive and un-phased.

"If I could, I would give you each all the days Marlene spent with me. If God asked me, that'd be exactly what I'd do. You three were all so very close. Both of you would know how to spend the time with her better than I did."

Jeff's eyes were tearing up. He tried to reassure her that Marlene enjoyed every moment she had spent with her sister, but Laverne told us she knew Marlene loved her but not nearly as much as Marlene loved us.

This was when I started to realize how much pain Laverne was in. How she felt she'd wasted all her life bickering with her sister. Aunt Laverne was so unselfish, wishing Marlene had spent more of her life with Jeff and me. It was what seemed like truly unconditional love at the time.

My great-aunt hugged my uncle again. She said, "Alzheimer's is a horrible disease."

We couldn't have agreed more. She hugged me. As we were letting go of each other, Laverne said it quietly, attempting to sound innocent and sad and sympathetic as she said it.

Laverne said those most heartless words. Had she been paid off by that mustached villain lurking in the background?

She whispered to me, "It's for the best."

It all happened very instantaneously, more a reflex than anything else. There was no hesitation in my action for decision making time because the decision has already been made.

The 184th person to speak such vulgarity in that funeral home was going to pay.

As Laverne was straightening from our hug, as soon as she finished pronouncing the "est" in best, I sucker punched my great-aunt Laverne in the nose. It was hard enough to not only break her nose but a couple of my knuckles, too. The momentum from the punch vaulted Aunt Laverne into the second row of seats. She had gone flying right over five of my grandmother's distant cousins and landed, thankfully, in some vacant seats.

I leaped into the vacant seats after my great-aunt, screaming, "How could you say something like that?"

I also said some very impolite and ungentlemanly things about Laverne's alleged promiscuity in the 1970s, her taste in clothes, and, yes, straight profanities for telling jokes at her sister's own wake. And yes, I admit I wasn't around in the seventies so the things I repeated were rumors at best. I admit that portion of my tirade was probably a little unfounded and inappropriate. However, I have no regrets in regards to my comments about her teal sequins evening dress with the ridiculous shoulder pads.

Honestly, who wears teal to a wake??

The strangers were having a difficult time trying to restrain me. Cousin Eddy, Laverne's only child had me by the ankles trying to pull me off his elderly mother. Robin's instincts took in, fight or flight, and as you'll come to find out, my mother is not one to for flight. So she proceeded to take her pointed high heels and use them in my defense.

Violet, who had been talking to my Aunt Cheryl in the back of the parlor, says Robin had the most precise and calm fighting style she'd ever seen. Accurately placed on poor cousin Eddy's ankles causing him to frequently wince and lose his hold on me two times.

I think more people wanted to try and stop me but nobody was stupid enough to get within striking distance of Robin's heels. So everybody stood around in a circle, watching the mess, until someone was smart enough to grab Ferguson from his smoke break.

Ferguson is the funeral director. He had been out in the parking lot talking with one of his staff members during the first two minutes of the necessary violence. Later that day I was informed that the embalming and burial business was his second career. His first career had been running a prison in El Paso, Texas. Ferguson rushed into the room, presumably after hearing my screams and Laverne's cries for help. He grabbed a billy club that had been stored in case of emergencies.

When he walked in, I had been suspended in the air with my hands firmly gripped around Aunt Laverne's throat and somebody. Ferguson proceeded to smack me with a blow to the ribs and bruised two of them. I'm not mad though. Ferguson did what he had to do. It wasn't a personal thing.

Honestly, there's only thing I have to say against Ferguson. In the middle of the hullabaloo, I hadn't even seen his face when I felt the billy club on my side, but I knew it was Ferguson without looking. He always reeked of tobacco smoke. I mean with the smell you think he'd gone out of his way to chug a carton of cigarettes into his closet before picking a suit out to dress.

When I lay on back looking up holding my ribs, Ferguson leaned over and said, "Stop that," before having a fit of smoker's cough.

Not to mention those yellow teeth.

It's a filthy habit really.

And to her credit, Aunt Laverne got in some good shots of her own. She had been scratching at my wrists with her acrylic nails.

I was a little bit relieved that the funeral director separated us at that moment because Laverne was starting to overtake me. How embarrassing would that have been?

In four minutes flat, Ferguson had restored order but by the next day it was obvious someone in attendance had called the local newspaper and reported the incident.

They called it things like the Funeral Fiasco, the Mistake at the Wake, the Burial Bru-ha-ha, and other things of that nature. You get the picture.

You Say For The Best, How So?

The morning of the funeral while we were getting ready to leave for the service, my mom kept asking me if I was all right. I kept telling her I'm fine. Violet kept asking how I was feeling. I told her I was doing better. I tried to figure out how long I'd been telling these automatic lies to everyone before Father Larry's speech got under way.

People would ask, "How you holding up?"

I'd say without thinking, "Good."

It gets a little depressing saying you're sad and you feel like shit. They already knew my grandmother was dead. You're just whining when you claim your knuckles still hurt.

I mean it was easily one of the saddest days of my life.

Is that what they'd of like me to say?

The oak pews weren't exactly the epitome of comfort. My butt kept falling asleep during Father Larry's speech and every time I adjusted my seating position, a sharp pain from my ribs knocked the wind out of me, which only made the speech even more excruciating than it already was.

Robin leaned forward and put her hand on my Uncle Jeff's shoulder and the other on my grandpa's. She was doing her best to comfort him. My uncle Donny had his arm around Cheryl to soothe her crying. Violet and I took turns—one of us crying the other consoling. Most times these actions were simultaneous. We were all doing our best to comfort each other.

We all were failing miserably.

I glanced back a few rows to find Laverne's bandaged face complete with a strip of metal to realign her nose.

It's for the best

The recipient of this statement should take it as 'not the end of the world' and see the positive effects of the event. My mind trickled through the entire notion that it was for the best.

How so?

Three days ago, my grandma had been here. She was, as of Monday morning, gone, never to exist again. Fred, the man she built her life with, is never again going to hear his wife say that she loves him. Marlene will never be able to calm down my aunt Cheryl after a tough day at work. Marlene will never watch me receive my high school diploma.

Those people in the two front rows are a lot worse off than we were three days ago.

Perhaps my perspective needed a wider scope, the illusive reason might have been at the expense of my family's grief towards the benefit of another (or multiple others). Who then?

Maybe it was an issue of pure dollars and cents. It was possible that the undertaker who would bury Marlene later that day was strapped for cash to pay for his kids' tuition. The same financial bit could apply to Ferguson, the funeral home director. I called in to them during the next week to investigate this possibility.

"Hello. Ferguson's Funeral Home."

"Hi," I said. "This is David Lanzeby. I'm a reporter for the *Plain Dealer*. Could I bother you with a few questions? I promise it'll be brief."

"Sure thing."

"Great. I'm doing a piece on the effects of the national economy on local businesses. Would you say that business has been slower or faster in the past year?"

"Oh I don't know," Ferguson said. "I'd say it's been pretty normal."

“So you would say you have not found your business in distress or financially strapped in the past year?”

“No, not at all. In fact, we’re slightly exceeding our projected profits. The rent on our building actually went down.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“And please disregard this if it is too personal, but do you have a wife and children?”

“A wife. We have no plans of children. I’m not a fan of the little germ carriers.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” I said. “The Misses and I enjoy our vacations and our free time.”

“I hear ya,” said Ferguson. “We’re going on our annual trip to Hawaii on Friday actually.”

“Lucky man.”

“You bet. Any more questions?”

“No, I think that’ll do it. Thanks for your help.”

I made a similar call to the undertaker who turned out to be Ferguson’s nephew. Neither of them had kids to support. Ferguson’s nephew didn’t have a wife and was doing this as a side job before going to graduate school in psychology. He was happy to inform me that he had just won a full ride to the University of Oregon. Anyways, I would like to think that the undertaker and the funeral director would be willing to undergo minor setbacks in business.

The funeral attendees were all quite saddened by the affair. The hospice workers and nurses who’d aided my grandmother’s final days were out of the money that my grandfather was paying them for their valuable service. My grandfather would gladly spend his savings to keep his wife alive. By the end of her life, Marlene really had no interaction or impact on anyone else besides our family. Sure, there was stress on our family but we would all gladly be put ourselves through much more because of how much she meant to us.

How was this for the best?

The Comforting Concept of God’s Plan

My ass has fallen asleep again. Father Larry droned on with his speech. This is what I remember hearing: “...blah, blah, blah.. As hard as it is for us to comprehend our sister Marlene’s death, it is a part of God’s bigger plan for us...blah, blah, blah...”

I hadn’t given the idea of God’s plan any thought before my grandmother’s funeral. People keep mentioning the notion, saying things like, “Everything happens for a reason.” The whole notion seems a little farfetched though. I mean I can see how everybody feels special that they would be included in God’s thoughts and intentions with the entire universe.

I wonder if maybe that’s what draws so many people towards religion. Does everybody feel important because God thinks they’re special and necessary components of his, her, its plan?

And all the good things I’ve heard of that are done in God’s name make us look like kids trying to get daddy’s attention.

The cure for polio, Gandhi’s legacy in the liberation of India, that promotion you got at your previous believed to be dead end job, Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, the arrest of that sexual deviant who lived across the street from your local middle school, Dr. Martin Luther King’s role in the Civil Rights Movement, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and that scratch off lottery ticket you won five dollars on your last birthday are all things that could be presumed to be a part of God’s plan.

After these things people will tend to say, “God is good.”

He, she, it is responsible for all these wonderful things. They say that God is infinitely good. These things all seem to be proof of that.

But if *everything* that ever happens is a part of God’s plan, then something is certainly fucked up.

Listen, Children born into poverty, September 11th, the breakup of the Beatles, the Holocaust, the speeding ticket that shot your insurance premiums through the roof, Marlene’s death, the Black Plague, pop music, slavery, Alzheimer’s disease (for that matter all disease, especially of incurable variety), World War I, World War II, any battle that ever occurred where life was lost, the Ku Klux Klan and their hate crimes including lynchings, racism in general, birth defects, sexism, Hiroshima, all mental diseases, all murders and all suicides would all have to be included in God’s plan.

And in response to these things people will say, “God works in mysterious ways.”

Mysterious or just plain fucked up.

I don’t know about you but I’m not too pumped to be a part of God’s plan. If you haven’t noticed, a lot of it happens to be pretty horrible.

A Brief Yet Full Account of What Chance Knew About His Father

There was one lucky bastard who was not forced to sit through Father Larry’s emotionless and droning speech. That lucky bastard was my father, Charlie. The reason my father was not in attendance was not because Charlie and Marlene did not get along. In fact, I am told that the two actually found each other to be quite likeable the one and only time their paths would ever cross.

This was the Thanksgiving of my mother’s senior year at Kent State University. Robin had brought her boyfriend at the time, Charlie, back home to meet her family. The family that would have been Charlie’s if Charlie and Robin had gotten married.

That never happened.

This is the same family that would become the family of any child that Charlie and Robin might ever have together.

That did.

During her time majoring in Education at Kent State, Robin worked part-time as a receptionist at the student center. Charlie was studying physics in the graduate school through a program from the Canadian government where he is from.

In the 1980s, the Canadian government provided a program for its citizens to study at American universities, provided that the individuals would come back to Canada after their studies to work. The idea is that some would become teachers, researchers, or work in the Canadian private sector and spread what they had learned at the better funded and more developed American universities. The Canadian government wished to import brain power by temporarily exporting its citizens.

Charlie also worked at the Kent State Student Center. He was responsible for setting up the desks and chairs for meetings that took place in the university’s administration. Charlie’s job required him to take orders via a walkie-talkie about which room to setup and in what order. The giver of these walkie-talkie orders was none other than Robin, the secretary.

To this day, Robin maintains that her primary responsibility was to “boss that idiot around.”

And one day, Charlie's shift ended and he said bye to Robin who still had a couple hours left on her shift. An hour after Charlie said bye, the reception phone rang.

It was Charlie.

"Want to get together after your shift?" he said.

That's how my parents met. About six months later, Robin started having morning sickness. It wasn't long after yours truly popped out and Marlene started giving tours to strangers of the hospital room that contained her daughter and newborn grandson.

What Robin did not know when she innocently accepted Charlie's offer was that Charlie already had a wife and daughter already living back in Canada. My father did not come to the hospital the day I was born or anytime after for that matter. On the night of my birth, a college friend of my mom's spotted my father at a bar that was roughly twenty minutes from the hospital I was born in. He was chain smoking, like usual, and enjoying half off beers.

"Want to get together after you shit?"

"Sure."

These are the insignificant choices we make that change the course of our lives.

Robin did not know that Charlie would be moving back to Canada twenty months after that phone call.

The Proudest Tour Guide

I suppose the main reason I got so infuriated over his speech was that he spoke for a good long while without saying anything about my grandmother's life except that she was a Christian. I mean, it's nice to know Marlene was able to keep her faith for more than six decades, but there was so much more to her. Father Larry left out all the details making Marlene an individual and stripped her life story down to a least common denominator, her religion.

Father Larry could have talked about how Marlene had helped his own church to feed the homeless each year. He could have mentioned how she loved bird watching, especially when she saw the cardinal, her favorite. He could have talked about how she was an excellent card player ready to take her relatives money before and after holiday dinners. Father Larry could have said something about how my grandmother was the glue that kept my family together, but he didn't mention one detail about what she did with the decades she spent here on Earth except that she believed in God.

He hadn't even bothered to take some time to write an original speech. I had a good mind to punch Father Larry in the face too but I was keeping my promise to Jeff, especially after the whole Laverne situation. I kept reminding myself that we were in a place of worship.

Plus, Father Larry was much smarter than Laverne was. At least, he had courage to do all his offensive speaking in front of a church filled with people instead of whispering it in my ear.

She went on and on to complete strangers about how proud of her daughter she was, her daughter who had just been the first one in the entire family to earn a college degree. My grandmother would talk these poor people's ears off about this mother and child, her daughter and her grandson, who she couldn't stop smiling and talking about.

"Would you like to see my grandson?" she would say. "This is my daughter, Robin. That's my daughter. That's my grandson."

All the self distraction I was doing with my irritations about Father Larry's impersonal mumbo jumbo stopped working. He was taking his seat again. I looked at the open casket and

my grandmother's face. It was lifeless and odd from the way that I would come to find out is common with most embalmers' use of makeup, often caked on and hiding the imperfections to the point where the skin begins to look unreal like some sort of plastic not previously belonging to a living breathing human being. I hadn't seen my grandmother in a dress for a long time because of her illness and it was like a wax figure of image of my grandmother. But I still knew and was forced to realize finally:

That's my grandmother.

I looked towards that slightly but significantly different looking person than the one I remembered throughout my whole life. I was forced to see the truth of whole funeral. The obvious and clear fact of what you see when you look towards that open casket.

That's my grandmother.

Our **sister**, **Marlene** is with
(noun; sibling gender) (noun; name)

you now. To our Father up in Heaven who's watching
over his children. Amen.

First Missed Azimuth Dream Concert

Al and I had been on our way to our very first Azimuth Dream show. A couple of kids at our school had seen them open for another band and we didn't hear the end of it from them. At that point, Azimuth had recorded only five tracks. There was an EP floating around, but it was impossible to get a hold of. The band members had passed it out themselves after the show our buddies couldn't stop talking about—"Guitar that will put you into another realm, especially with the bud we had smoked before."

At the time, Al and I were fourteen. We were freshmen in high school so neither of us had a car so we had to get a ride from my mom. The show luckily fit our budgets.

It was a free show.

Or at least we thought it was free.

My mom had dropped us off. She was running late for her parent-teacher conferences.

"Time to meet parents of the lunatics," she said with a smile.

The car zipped off before our feet hit the sidewalk. The show was at the Grog Shop in Coventry, a post-hippie section of Cleveland Heights that little bookstores, shops selling every odd knickknack someone could possibly make while talking about how messed up the government was, and a movie theatre that played indie films. It was the equivalent of spending the day at the mall for an anti-materialist who thinks corporations are evil.

My mom's car rounded the corner and Al said, "Time for good tunes."

Later, this phrase would evolve to time for the good stuff as he'd open up a beer or pour some whiskey he'd stolen from his dad's liquor cabinet.

We walked through the first set of doors and started to go through the second when the bouncer stopped us.

"Hold on, guys."

I thought initially that he was stopping us to check our IDs and, frankly, Al and I certainly looked like the type to sneak a couple beers, because, well, we are that type.

"Oh, it's cool," I said. "We're not drinking."

"Obviously," the bouncer said.

"What do you mean, obviously?" Al said taking offense.

The bouncer made a grunt and looked at Al.

"I said obviously, because you two don't have a single piece of facial hair between the two of you. Why don't you hit puberty and then maybe you can talk to me with your chest all puffed out like that?"

"We can't drink," I said trying to preempt Al's snark-filled reply. "What'd you stop us for? Do we need to get X's or stamps on our hands?"

"That," the bouncer said finally, removing his stare from Al, "and your canned food donation."

"Canned food?"

"Did I stutter?" the bouncer said.

Great, I thought, he was getting irritated with me now. I didn't care whether he liked me or not, but I didn't want to piss him off and keep us from seeing Azimuth. I avoided my desire to tell this roid-raging moron with his long blonde mullet what I thought.

"That's not it," I said. "I just thought it was a free show."

"It's a benefit show. One donation," he said pointing at the cardboard box of canned food we had rushed by without even noticing, "one admission." He shifted his pointing to the entrance.

I turned to Al who was unusually quiet.

"Did you know about this donation business?" I said.

"Not exactly."

"You knew about the donation?? Why didn't you tell me about it?"

"I mean, I saw it on the flyer, but it said *donation*."

"So you saw this but didn't grab a can of green beans out of your cupboard?"

"I told you I saw it," Al said. "But since when does *donation* mean required? Donations are acts of generosity. Those guys ringing the Christmas bells with the red donation things you throw your change into, you don't see them holding guns and saying to everyone walking out of the grocery store saying, 'Donate or die, fuckers!'"

"It can be a donation and still be required."

"How?"

Our favorite mullet and leather enthusiast jumped backed into the conversation. "Can you two have your little gossip meeting over there, away from my entrance?"

A few people had been stuck behind us and all of them had something in their hand, whether it was a can of corn or a box of pasta. We moved to the side and let all the people who knew how donations sometimes worked enjoy the show.

"Why would you call something a donation if it's required?" Al said.

"Because," I said, trying to explain this as calmly as possible, "the food they're collecting isn't going to Azimuth Dream. It's going to be given to some people who need it."

"Why are we still arguing about the gross misrepresentation of donations on the promo flyer?" Al said which was smart. We didn't need to waste anymore time.

"Where can we buy canned food?" Al said.

"I don't know."

“Why don’t we ask the bouncer?”

“You ask him.”

“Why me?” I said. “You mad that he pointed out that we don’t have facial hair?”

“Just ask him.”

“Fine,” I said and waited for the few people that were already in line to get in before I approached.

“You again?” he said. “Done chatting it up about the latest soap opera gossip with your gal pal?”

I kept in mind the show that I was about to miss and the fact that Al and I wouldn’t have a ride home for the next two hours.

“Where’s the nearest place to buy some canned food?”

He hesitated. I thought he was racking his brain and its four IQ points for a good insult to come back with. “There’s a grocery store about seven blocks north.”

“Seven blocks?”

“I am really starting to think you have an actual hearing problem.”

I heard a few chords, someone tuning a guitar. Sound check was starting and time was running short.

Turning to Al, I said, “Ready to run?”

Seven blocks later, I was profusely sweating and on the verge of collapse. Al, on the other hand, hadn’t even broken a sweat. We had made it to the grocery store but it was dark. The big letters spelling out the store’s name were dark, too. We came up to the door with a small sign on it.

UNDER CONSTRUCTION UNTIL THE 3RD

I gasped, still out of breath, and said, “Fucking Mullet knew.”

“Huh?”

“The bouncer.” I sucked in another breath. “Knew this place was closed.”

“Shithead,” Al said. “Follow me.”

He ran up to a house across the street. He knocked on the door. “We should have thought of this earlier.”

I kept a lid on my curiosity, instead opting to breathe heavily.

An elderly man answered. His furrowed brow made it clear he wasn’t too thrilled to find two high schoolers on his porch.

“Hello,” Al said.

“You’re interrupting my TV show,” he said.

“I’m sorry, sir.” Al paused. I think he was expecting to hear something along the lines of *It’s okay* or *Don’t worry about it*.

Instead, Al got a “What do you want?”

“We were wondering if we could possibly have two cans of corn or anything nonperishable.”

“No solicitors,” the old man said. He pointed at a sticker saying those same eloquent words. Below the words, in fine print, was **CITY ORDINANCE #4988778945**.

“But it’s for charity.”

“What charity?”

Al gave me a sideways glance for a tiny fraction of a second that our welcoming old man didn't see. But the light bulb went off in his head.

"It's the Students for the Hungry of Northeast Ohio."

"Never heard of them before."

"We're new," Al continued building up the bullshit to make it more believable. "We are doing a food drive this month and some charity concerts with local bands."

"Oh, I did hear about that." The old man's face relaxed. "Isn't there a concert like that going on up the street?"

"As a matter of fact it is." Al was now doing his buddy-buddy voice.

"Why's the mute all sweaty?" the old man said. He was referring to, of course, to me.

"Chance, here, has been carrying all of the donations we've collected into our van."

The old man glared but seemed to finally accept Al's explanation.

"I don't normally do this," he said. "Wait here."

He went down the hallway and turned the corner, presumably, to the kitchen.

I had finally caught my breath and decided I need to start working out

"And the award for best actor goes to," I said, "Al Radford."

"Thank you." Al mimicked a bow.

The old man came back down the hall with a couple cans of tomato soup.

"Thanks again for your contribution."

The old man shrugged and said, "I'm a generous man."

I wondered if such a struggle for two measly cans of tomato soup could really be confused for generosity.

"What'd you say the name of your charity's was, again?" The old man's eyes squinted ever so slightly more.

There was a brief moment of hesitation before Al said, "Students for the Homeless of Northeast Ohio."

The old man's face tensed again.

"You said it was the Students for the Hungry of Northeast Ohio."

"Sorry sir," Al said, "but I believe you're mistaken."

There might have been some room for salvaging this charade if Al had said that he had made the error before, perhaps explained there had been a name change in the organization recently or that the imaginary organization provided food for the homeless who are for self-explanatory reasons hungry and for the hungry who are not quite homeless. But who knows if this would have worked on our generous old man.

Doubtful.

"I'm not mistaken," he said tapping his temple with his pointer finger. "I've got a mind like a steel trap."

"I assure you that we're collecting donations for the Students for the Hungry of Northeast Ohio."

"Steel trap," he said, shutting the door. "I don't know what kind of scam you're running but I do know that I'm calling the police."

The door shut and we heard the sound of a dead bolt being turned.

"Who the hell can't give up two fucking cans of tomato soup?" Al said. "Like I'm going to go around spending my days scamming senior citizens for canned food."

When we noticed a cop car down the street, we high tailed it out of there. It was probably just patrolling the neighborhood but we didn't need to risk making our problems any worse.

About halfway back to the Grog Shop, we tried again at a house with an average looking front yard. (If there is anything a grumpy elderly person takes pride in, it is his or her front yard.) Al and I talked to a mother on the younger side and we told her the plain truth. She, thankfully, had no qualms about handing us a couple cans of corn to send us off. We jogged back to the venue, hoping that somehow the show had been delayed and that Azimuth was still playing.

When we got to the doors I found myself, again, sweating and panting. More importantly and unfortunately, we found a crowd of people walking out of the venue. The normal post-show congregation, a mix of smokers, those waiting for rides, and those who had nowhere particular to be. Our friend, the bouncer, was coming out of the front door and was walking past us to the parking lot.

"Grocery store closed?" he said.

"Fuck you," Al said, which I was thinking but unable to say because of my wheezing and panting.

"You two come back and see me when your balls finally drop."

The bouncer walked off.

"He's just pissed because his balls have shrunk to the size of peas with all those steroids he's got pumped in him," Al said. "You all right?"

My head had gotten extremely light from the mild hyperventilation, that is, if something termed hyper can ever be considered mild. It felt like my head was a helium balloon attached to my shoulders by a thin thread.

"C'mon, sit down before you pass out on the sidewalk."

We were navigating through the crowd to a nearby metal bench but on the way this dumbass blew his cigarette exhale right into my face. It didn't help that I was in the middle of taking big deep breaths and so it was like I had given mouth-to-mouth to a chimney all of a sudden. The kid looked about 18. He looked at me for a second and then continued on with his conversation without so much as one little *sorry*.

After I had finished coughing, I tapped the inconsiderate asshole on his shoulder. He turned around. His eyebrows were up like he hadn't just seen me two seconds before.

"Mind apologizing?" I said.

"For?"

"For blowing your smoke in my face."

"It's a free country. I can smoke over here if I want."

I wonder if guilty criminals had ever used the *It's a free country* statement for their defense.

"It is a free country and this is everyone's air."

"Piss off."

Al tugged at my arm because he knew this was a result of being tired and pissy from missing the Azimuth set. He might have even felt a little bit bad about the donation debacle. We kept walking but I just had to yell back, "Smoking kills!"

Not the coolest sounding thing, I admit, but it was the best I could come up with at the time in my state of low oxygen.

The guy didn't miss a beat, though. He yelled back, "So do my fists."

"Drop it, Chance." Al pushed me forward towards the bench before I could reply with another genius line.

We sat on the bench, talking about anything but the show, the bouncer, and the smoker.

"Can I tell you something," Al said. "In confidence."

“Of course.”

“I think I like Lydia, man.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“Where did that come from?” I said. “She’s a pretty girl, funny and all that but she’s always going on about those conspiracies. Always talking somebody’s ear off about the JFK assassination or some UFO sighting.”

“It doesn’t bother me though. I mean a lot of the stuff is pretty interesting.”

“Don’t get me wrong. Lydia is cool to have as a friend but say you do go after her and the stars align and you two eventually get married. You should be prepared for her to not be wearing a wedding veil. She’ll probably just wear some tin foil on her head.”

“I knew I shouldn’t have told you.”

“You know to block out the mind control waves being sent out by the government.”

“Stop talking.”

“Okay,” I said. “Relax.”

I spotted a gorgeous looking girl. She was zigzagging back and forth between the post-concert loiterers. She was passing out something to each person she talked to. I figured she was doing some sort of promotional thing for the Grog Shop.

“When did you tell your mom to come get us?”

“10:15.”

Al looked down at his watch. “It’s 10:10.”

The bench we were on was a couple yards away from the crowd that had all seen the show. The lovely looking lady started walking directly towards off. I tried to play it off that I hadn’t been watching her moves. Her t-shirt was black with big block sky blue letters. It said, PURE.

“That was really cool what you did back there,” she said when she got to us. She was looking at me. I had no clue what he was talking about when he said it, but that could have been the disarming smile or perhaps those legs.

“What? Gasping for air?”

“No,” she said with a small laugh. She took off her backpack. “Telling that kid the reality of tobacco.”

She reached into the front pouch of the backpack and pulled out a business card. She handed it to me.

PURE, anti-smoking organization

www.PURE.org

“We’re looking for people just like you to spread the message. There’s an event on Friday if you’re interested. I’m Violet, by the way.”

“Thanks,” I said, dazed. “Chance.”

She tilted her head slightly as she nodded. I’m pretty sure I was still smiling by the time she had gotten lost in the crowd again.

Al said, “There’s your mom.”

We got up and Al looked down at the two cans of corn we’d placed next to the bench.

“Hold on,” Al said.

He picked the cans up, took them over to the donation bin, and placed them on the pile.

“Now that’s a donation,” he said as we were getting in the backseat, “100% voluntary.”

The First PURE Event

My first PURE event was during the winter break of freshman year. I hadn’t heard of the organization before Violet gave me that flimsy pamphlet. The brochure explained how they were an anti-smoking campaign based out of Cleveland but was spreading throughout the Midwest.

I told myself I was only going because of my hatred of smoking. However when I arrived I found myself looking for Violet.

Attached to the brochure was an event invitation clipped to it. The event was taking place in my old elementary school’s gymnasium. I arrived to find only a half a dozen cars parked in the lot. There were no signs or anything so I double checked the brochure to make sure I had the right time and date which I did. In the gymnasium, a handful of people were unpacking crayons and coloring books. No one took any note of my entrance so I looked around for a minute or two trying to locate exactly who I should be talking to.

Then, there was Violet. She was taking down stacks of miniature seats and placing them around the equally tiny tables. She was wearing an unflattering black hoodie with lime green block letters that spelled out PURE. There was faint trace of sweat from her forehead and I as looked, or flat out stared, she kept brushing her hair from her eyes. It kept drooping over her face when she’d lean down to the tiny person tables.

She was beautiful.

I was more curious than love struck if that makes any sense. My feet were heading towards her before my brain had prepared something to say.

I got to where she was and said, “Need help?”

“Finally,” she said. “Todd and Nichole have been unpacking coloring books for the past half hour acting like they’re building the pyramids or something. There’s only going to be 60 kids here. Does it really take a minute to unpack two coloring books?”

“Don’t forget the crayons too.”

Her irritation melted off and she smiled. After that I knew I was done for.

“Chance, right?”

I was flattered she remembered.

We could hear all the little munchkins coming clear down the hallway. It was the noise with a strange buzz to it, a mixture of whining, bullying, laughter, and flat out yelling. Something like I’d imagine a small stampede to be like.

Somebody yelled jokingly, “Everyone, man your post.”

There were 60 of Briarwood Elementary’s finest coming for two hours of anti-smoking laced entertainment. You could tell the teachers were grateful for the temporary peace we were about to provide. They mouthed the words, ‘Thank you,’ and detached small persons from their legs. The six established PURE members would split up the restless crowd into groups of ten and take them through the six stations planned out.

Violet said, “Would you mind sticking with me?”

Of course, I said yes.

We had six girls, four boys, and all seemed to be strung out on artificially flavored juice and sugary fruit snacks. To hell with windmills, if somebody developed a humane way of putting

a harness on these little ones and let them loose on the playground, the world would have enough clean energy to power itself twice over.

Our first station was the coloring station.

“Okay,” Violet said, “this is Chance and my name is Violet. We’re going to be hanging out with you guys today. If you need anything, just ask one of us. Everybody ready to have some fun today?”

There was a mixed but surprising loud response of *Yeah!* and *I am!* from our group. I checked my ears and was happy to find no blood was coming out.

“All right, that’s what I like to hear. We’re going to start out with coloring. Who likes to color?”

Another unified chorus of *Me!* came. There was such enthusiasm that it took a second for me to realize I too had put my hand up. Violet and I helped all of them open their crayons. We took seats on opposite sides of the circular table. Violet and I had to sit on our knees. The table seemed like it was all of four inches off the ground.

The first two pages of the coloring book were both of the same woman’s body and the same face. The faces were of the same woman except one had a cigarette and the other did not. The body portion of this expressionless woman was drawn like a dissection so that you could see her lungs.

“Okay guys,” Violet said, “we’re going to color the woman on the right’s lungs like a healthy persons lungs. Does anybody know what color we should color the non-smoker’s lungs?”

This time I was able to restrain myself from raising my hand eagerly even though I assure you I knew the answer. A little girl with pigtails and hair bobbles in her hair answered, very properly, “The healthy lungs should be pink.”

“Absolutely correct,” Violet said.

“My mom is a doctor. I know a lot about how to be a doctor because of my mom. I want to be a doctor like her but daddy said its smarter if you marry a doctor instead of being one.”

“Smart girl,” I said.

Pigtails and Hair Bobbles smiled in a matter of fact way before she got back into coloring.

A little boy with spiked hair, held up a crayon, and said to Violet, “Did your parents name you after a crayon?”

“Thankfully no,” Violet said, smirking.

This was enough explanation for Spikes but then Pigtails wanted more info.

“Where’d you get your name from then?”

“My grandmother was a gardener. She named my mother is named Daisy. The last time they planted flowers together they planted violets. My grandmother told my mom how much she loved violets and how good they looked. And my grandmother passed away that week.”

Pigtails and the others nodded like they were board members approving a new investment plan.

“Okay, guys,” Violet said, putting PURE back on first priority. “Only do the first page.”

A little guy with humungous glasses who colored like a maniac with no regards for the lines was sitting next to me. After scribbling a couple wild pink lines on the page, he looked over at me for a couple seconds. I pretended not to notice and kept on drawing but that didn’t stop his persistence in staring. Slowly, I turned my head to him, my eyebrows raising.

He didn’t blink for a few seconds and finally said, “Do you like sharks?”

“Who doesn’t like sharks?” I said.

“My mom doesn’t like sharks.”

“Bummer.”

“My mom doesn’t like sharks because they’re so violent.”

“Well, that’s true.”

“No, it’s not. Whale sharks aren’t violent.”

“Whale shark?” I said. “Are you trying to play a joke on me?”

“No, they’re real. Whale sharks are real.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“Can I go back to Ms. Browning room then?” he said. “I’ve got my *Big Book of Sharks* in my book bag.”

“And there’s one of these so called whale sharks in it?”

“Duh.”

“I’ll go with you back to your class after we’re done with the Fun Stations.”

He seemed to be okay with this resolution but added, “I’m telling you they’re real though.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“They are the biggest fish in the whole entire world. The largest one was 41.5 feet long.”

Violet must have seen that everyone was done with their first page of healthy pink lungs.

“Now we’re going to color the second lady,” she said. “She’s a smoker. Does anybody know what color a smoker’s lungs are?”

Pigtails and Hair Bobbies almost broke her arm putting her hand up.

“Smoker’s lungs are black. My mom told me that.”

“Right again,” Violet said.

The little hands of our table sifted through the boxes for their black crayons. I resumed the conversation with the shark fanatic.

“How much do these whale sharks weigh?”

“47,000 pounds.”

“My, my,” I said, “that means it’s eating a whole lot of fishes. Does it eat a bunch of other sharks? Entire boats? Is that what sunk the Titanic, a whale shark?”

“No,” he was visibly disturbed by ignorance. “They don’t eat ships or sharks. They’re filter feeders.”

“Filter what-ers?”

“Filter feeders,” he said. “They have these filter things in their mouths. Whale sharks suck in a whole bunch of water and then close their mouths and push all the water back out and catch the plankton in their filter things.”

“Weird.”

“Yeah, but it’s a shark so all sharks aren’t violent.”

“What’s your favorite shark then?”

“The great white sharks.”

“Yeah, me too.”

He calmly nodded his approval at my preference.

“What’s your name?” I said.

“Ronnie.”

“Ronnie, I’m Chance.”

A whistle blew signifying it was time for us to move to the next station. We herded our group to the movie station where the kids watched a video about cartoon squirrels that ran around playing some form of squirrel soccer with acorns. The video zoned out the kids like Al, Lydia, and I get during *Maury*, which is only important to know because it gave Violet and I time to talk more.

"Thanks for coming," she said.

"My pleasure."

"Really though, it's awesome that you came. We are really still trying to get established. You know, find our identity and all that."

Some of the bad squirrels (which were wearing leather jackets and sketched after 1950s greasers) kept trying to offer the star of the acorn soccer teams, Sammy the Squirrel, cigarettes.

"What do you mean?" I said. "Isn't PURE an anti-smoking organization?"

"Well yeah, of course we are all about not smoking and we're a part of that huge movement, but we're still trying to figure out which part of that big movement we are going to be."

"Sorry for being dumb about this but what different parts are there?"

"Let me ask you something and I promise I won't be offended but can you name a part of the anti-smoking movement that you know?"

"Not much."

"But surely you've heard of some part of it. I can tell you know what I'm driving at but you're being too polite to say it."

"The only thing I've really heard of is the TRUTH organization."

"See?" Violet said. "I knew you knew what I was talking about. TRUTH is the first established name in the anti-smoking game. Are you familiar with their approach at all?"

At this point in the kid's film, a rivalry soccer match had been setup between Sammy the Squirrel's team and the greaser-type squirrels.

I told Violet about a TRUTH commercial I remembered. In it, a guy with a megaphone was shouting outside of a big tobacco company's sky scraper. He was shouting off facts about the deaths caused by cigarettes each year while people in the background stacked up body bags around the building.

"Yeah," Violet said. "That's a perfect example of TRUTH. They've got these very in your face ways of saying simply: smoking kills. TRUTH has made a nationally known name for themselves by taking the direct confrontational route with Big Tobacco."

"Makes sense," I said. "So what's PURE trying to do?"

"Well, as TRUTH is the only good example of how to run a successful, well known anti-smoking campaign circa 2005, we want to learn from their example. Starting out, we were trying to be them which was a huge mistake. Like the TRUTH organization focuses on the largest age group of new smokers: teenagers."

"Hence, the angst ridden commercials?"

"Precisely and they always advertise during snowboarding, skateboarding, in between music videos and on entertainment news channels." She paused and said, "Sorry I'm rambling."

"No, you're not. You're telling me some interesting shit I would have never thought of. Keep going."

"Okay so just like advertisers pick television programs to suit their targeted demographic, TRUTH is acting on good marketing instinct. That's why you see pills for erectile dysfunction getting pushed during boring baseball games, chocolate milk and fruit snacks on cartoon stations.

And TRUTH was right in going after teens because that's exactly where the first big push needed to get made in the flood of the smoking epidemic. We, PURE, tried to do that but whatever we tried to tailor ourselves to teens they, TRUTH, had already done it and done it much better. We didn't realize that they already had a complete monopoly on the anti-smoking movement's teenage-focused side. I mean they have a state of the art website and regularly promote a national tour of teenage friendly bands preaching their Big Tobacco is Bad mantra. We needed to get out of their shadow because they were leap years ahead of us in the adolescent department."

At this point, the greaser-type squirrels were promptly embarrassed because they would get winded allowing Sammy and company to easily defeat their opponents.

"Is that why we find ourselves in this elementary school gymnasium?"

"In a word, yes," Violet said. "PURE is finally making the adjustments we need to thrive."

She explained how publicly PURE was praising TRUTH's efforts and success but that TRUTH left plenty of room for other organizations. PURE was going after individuals way before TRUTH came into the picture, which is the teenage years. Violet told me about the practical reasons that TRUTH needed to spend those millions on music tours, fancy websites, and commercial time.

"You need all these fireworks and shiny lights to get the average teenager to pay any attention but with kids there's a whole new front we, PURE, can conquer. Think about most of the kids at school. You give one of them a car and they're bored with it in a month, if not a week. On the other hand, if you give a child a box, they'll be ecstatic about it for weeks. The first week it's a race car. The second, it's an army fort. Then, the box transforms into the White House. The next, a space shuttle. With our modest means right now, it's a great opportunity for us to have our impact on it all. We're going to get through to the younger kids in a cheaper, more efficient way than the TRUTH organization can with teens."

Her passion—the absolute enthusiasm in her voice—was sexy.

The whistle blew again so we gathered up the troops and headed to the next station. Violet allowed me to take the reins and teach the kids a wholesome game of *Pin the Breathing Tube on the Throat Cancer Patient* (or *Tracheostomical Pin the Tail on the Donkey*). They don't really have a smooth ring to them, do they? I spared as many of the details as possible but Violet chimed in occasionally to make sure the kids knew a breathing tube was commonly used after throat cancer surgery. I was in charge of putting the blindfolds on the youngsters and spinning them enough to make the game challenged.

Forgetting the kids had just had lunch period, I had spun Ronnie too much.

We had just entered the bathroom with him held at arm's length from me when Ronnie's lunch reappeared. He was a trooper about it though. Before his stomach contents had been fully flushed, he said as if there had been no pause, "Great White Sharks have a maximum swimming speed of 25 miles per hour and a burst speed of 35 miles per hour that comes out when they're after some prey."

On the way back to the gymnasium, Ronnie and I took a detour to Ms. Browning's room where he showed me adequate documentation of his previous ramblings about the odd specimen of whale sharks. When we finally returned to the gym, our group was shown items that were the same price as a carton of cigarettes. X amount of toys and X amount of candies that one could buy instead of feeding their smoking habit. This station seemed to be the one where PURE's message resonated the most with the students.

One of the little girls in our group said, “You’re telling my dad could have bought me 23 Barbies and a Barbie Malibu Dollhouse for every one of his cartons of cigarettes?”

“I have the Barbie Malibu Dollhouse,” said Pigtails. “My mom doesn’t smoke. She’s a doctor.”

“And I could have gotten walkie-talkies, a basketball, and a football instead of my mom buying cigarettes,” said another distraught member of our crowd.

“Precisely,” said Violet who had a sinister grin from seeing the PURE seed being planted in this little girl.

The whistle blew again for a final time. Violet and I passed out PURE shirts and gave back the coloring books from the first station for the kids to take home.

“Thanks for talking sharks with me,” Ronnie said.

“Are you kidding?” I said. “It was awesome. I had no clue there even was such a thing as a whale shark before you told me. Sorry for making you sick.”

“It’s okay. I don’t mind throwing up. My sister hates throwing up, but I don’t mind it.”

“That’ll come in handy when you’re in college,” I said.

“Come on, Ronnie,” shouted Ms. Browning from across the gymnasium.

“I have to go.”

“I know. Can I get one more cool fact?”

He smiled and rattled off, “Great White Sharks can sense a tiny speck of blood in the water from up to three miles away.”

The kid knew his stuff.

“Want to hear another cool fact about sharks?” I said.

His eyes squinted. Ronnie was skeptical that he hadn’t already known whatever I was about to tell him.

“Sharks don’t smoke cigarettes. Got it?”

“Got it,” he said and ran off to his peers.

Cheesy, I know but hopefully it got the message home.

We packed up the stations. I stuck close to Violet.

“So what’d you think?” she said while we were stacking chairs.

“I’m into it.”

“You could be a part of it,” she said. “Do you think you might want to be a member?”

“Would we get to hang out like more?”

“I suppose so.”

“Where do I sign up?”

Violet and I ended up talking way after the others left. I don’t think I said a word to the other PURE members there that day. After all the following PURE events and meetings, I couldn’t tell you who else was even there that day. They were all just in the background to my beautiful Violet.

We stood outside our cars in the parking lot for a while.

“You did good by the way,” she said. “Except making Ronnie barf.”

“He’s a trooper,” I said, having images of Ronnie in a shark cage. “I meant to ask you earlier: is that really how you’re mom named you?”

She assured me it wasn’t a tall tale.

“I like that. It fits you, too.”

“What?”

“Violet. A pretty flower, pretty name, pretty...”

You can see where this sap fest was going, right? Luckily, she liked the mushy gushy.
 “Could I take you on a date, Ms. Violet?”

She put her index finger on her bottom lip like she was pondering the universe. With playful eyes, she said, “Only if you tell me how you got that name? Chance, that’s not an everyday name.”

“No joke,” I said, embarrassed at my ignorance. “I’m not really sure.”

“What do you mean you’re not sure?”

“I never asked.”

Violet put an exaggerated hand on her forehead and said, “I should know better but I guess you’ll have to find out and tell me on our date.”

And this, dear reader, is how lovers meet.

Do Not Attack A Prevost’s Squirrel

I opened up my eyes the morning after the funeral to find Violet coming into my room carrying two of my mom’s infamous breakfast sandwiches. These sandwiches are very close to Heaven on Earth in the form of egg and cheese on toasted everything bagels. Now as I’ve mentioned before Violet is already an amazing looking girl—I know how to pick them—but even she is made the tiniest bit sexier when there is some delicious food in her hands.

That Friday was actually our first anniversary. We were going to go to the Cleveland Metropark Zoo as we had for our first date. I had been 15, she 16 at the time. The zoo was the best option out of, frankly, a very limited amount of options that a 15 year old boy has for decent first date locations.

Al had pushed bowling. That was where he had taken Lydia on their first date. Lydia had made it clear to me not to go the bowling route—“I fell in love with Al in spite of the bowling alley not because of it”.

Besides Lydia, it is hard to conjure up romance when you’re wearing shoes that seem to be forever moist, rental shoes that the greater Cleveland population of size 12 wearers have sweated their way through.

Also, the ambiance is killed by the overweight tattooed fellow in the next lane wearing the short sleeve button up shirt with blue flames all over it. You think he looks disturbingly familiar to the guy you saw get arrested on that TV show where law enforcement gets followed around by a camera crew.

Not to mention, the only food available is not of the aphrodisiac variety and all have the words “fried” or “cheesy” in the names. Cheesy nachos, fried mushrooms, and of course, fried mozzarella cheese sticks.

Lydia advised me to take Violet to the movies.

“But we won’t be able to talk,” I said.

Lydia’s reply was “Exactly.”

She added, “And if things go well, there’s a unisex bathroom in the Southeast hallway.”

So my criteria for a good first date and my friends’ were different.

Other options included the mall. I seriously doubt anybody wants their first kiss with their true love to be next to the kiosk where some cell phone salesman wants to intrusively talk with you about cell phone plans.

I had thought of dinner at a nice restaurant (but yours truly didn't really have enough in his bank account for such a small luxury). I searched online for cheap date suggestions. On Mondays, the zoo was free to residents of Cuyahoga County.

Even the parking was free.

"I come bearing gifts," said Violet. "Delicious, fattening gifts."

"And this is why I love you."

Some time passed as we stuffed our faces.

"How'd you convince your mom you were sick?" I said.

"Didn't even try. I got ready the same way I usually do and left at the same time I always do for school."

"But they're going to call your mom by lunchtime."

"Listen," she said and waved me over to the hallway.

We could hear my mom on the phone downstairs.

"Hi. This is Violet's mother, Daisy Bennington. Violet isn't feeling too well this morning and I'm going to keep her home so she can get some rest."

There was a short pause.

"You have a lovely day too. I'll be sure to give Violet your well wishes."

Violet and I shouted down the hall, "Thanks, Mom Williams."

"Was I convincing enough?" she said back up the stairwell.

Honestly, my mom sounds nothing like Violet's. My mom's voice is something like a high tenor, clear and loud from years of experience being Ms. Williams for the first graders of Cleveland Public Schools. Violet's mom, on the other hand, is between a low tenor and high baritone depending largely on the day. (My 7th grade choir instructor, Mrs. Flannery, would be proud.)

But pitch is not the notable difference between the two women's voices. What makes them clearly not the same individual is that Violet's mother has a distinct raspy-ness from twenty plus years of smoking a pack and a half a day.

However, this vocal discrepancy is not a real problem in fooling the high school secretary, because Violet's mom hasn't ever talked to this secretary.

"Very authoritative."

"Notably authentic."

"Thank you, thank you," my mom said. "And before you ask Chance, I'm going to have your uncle call you off. I'm stopping over his house to drop off a couple of these bouquets and see my sister."

"You're the best," I said.

"I know."

The oddness of Violet being a coordinating director for PURE—only four others rank higher than Violet on the organizational hierarchy—is that Violet's mother is one of the most dedicated smokers you will ever find. When Violet was in middle school, Daisy had to have

major surgery to remove part of her lung for emphysema. She had to use an oxygen tank for weeks after leaving the hospital.

Even stranger, Violet has never once been able to ask her mother to quit smoking, and you've got to admit, that if somebody who has just had major lung surgery is diehard enough to alternate breaths of pure oxygen from a large metal container and breaths of tobacco smoke, there might very well be nothing that can make that person quit.

In the most unconventional of ways, I think Violet's work with PURE was really her way of asking her mother to quit.

We scarfed down the rest of the breakfast sandwiches and I took a quick shower. I came downstairs to the two of them having a cup of coffee.

"What's the word, ladies?"

"I'm going to your aunt and uncle's now, but after that I'm going to grab lunch with Mrs. Bourner."

"Oh, cool. Tell her I said hi."

"I will. What time do you guys think you'll be back from the zoo?"

"Probably around 4 or 5." I looked towards Violet for confirmation.

"Closer to 4," Violet said. "I've got to be home before my mom gets off of work so it looks like a normal day."

"Clever girl," my mother said.

Robin was a school teacher but she believed in breaks. She was taking the day off, too. More than that, she knew how you could spin your wheels trying to get things done when you're drained and it just isn't there. She believed in little recharges as long as I was serious when I did school stuff.

Work hard, play hard.

Plus, there was an element of mercy in giving us the day off after the emotional rollercoaster of the funeral.

"You know it."

"And how she came to date an idiot like my son is beyond comprehension."

I just shook my head. Violet kissed me on the cheek.

"My idiot," Violet said.

"You can take him," my mom said. "Do you guys have enough money?"

"Plenty," I said. "What's for dinner?"

"I was thinking about ordering Chinese. How's that sound?"

"Good."

"Violet, am I going to see you later?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Just be sure not to call me ma'am and we'll get along just fine. I should be here when you get back. You sure you don't need any money?"

"We're fine."

"Will you just take the twenty anyway?"

"No, I've got money already."

There was a brief verbal argument about the loaning of money and Violet finally took the twenty dollar bill, stating simply, "You two are like children. Let's go."

So we set out to the zoo for the second time. Our anniversary date.

We made it there around ten o'clock. Unlike our first date, we shelled out the extra eight dollars apiece—Mom William's twenty did end up coming in handy—to go to the Cleveland Metropark Rainforest. It's this wide glass building with a dome towards the center of it, right through the archway entrance, futuristic and shiny. The reason it's all glass is that the Rainforest building holds all these tropic plants and animals so it has to simulate the Amazon, a sauna-like environment. It's more or less modeled after a greenhouse to keep it nice and steamy in the cold Ohio winter.

Violet and I entered the Rainforest and went through the "medicine trail," which is a bunch of exotic plants that indigenous people have used for centuries to cure their ailments.

"Could you imagine having a migraine and not being able to drive to the pharmacy?" Violet said.

"That'd be bad," I said, "but how much worse would it be if you had some sort of rash going down in your Netherlands? I bet it's embarrassing enough talking to a doctor nowadays, an individual who is specifically trained to act professionally and clinically, but having to go to your local medicine man or whoever it is in your small indigenous village and say, 'My goddamn twig and berries are on fire.'"

"Let's stop talking about this."

We walked through the path a bit and after passing the indoor waterfall with the fake temple ruins. I vaguely remembered going on a field trip there in the 4th grade and thinking that it was an authentic temple of some extinct and mysterious peoples from ancient times. For some time, I was convinced that a real temple and natural waterfall are what the Rainforest building had simply been built around.

In one of the temple's little nooks, there was this crazy looking little monkey staring suspiciously at all the passersby. The thing was a Golden Lion Tamarin, according to the plaque. It was this bright shade of lighter orange with tints of red and brown.

"Looks like he just had a perm," Violet said, "or at least he used a blow dryer this morning."

"You'd be able to fit that thing in your purse."

We stared at the wily looking primate.

"I've been meaning to ask you how Al's been. Starting to get over Lydia?"

I shook my head. No.

"Not so much," I said as we continued on the path. "She's started seeing someone, too."

“Already?” Violet said. “Who is it?”

“His name is Aaron. I think it’s one of her cousin’s friends or something like that.”

“You think it’s a rebound?”

Violet pointed left and we made our way up the stairs.

“For anybody else it would be,” I said. “But Lydia, as you know, is experienced in the male department, so much so, that I think it might be wrong to call this Aaron thing a rebound.”

“You’re saying Lydia is too busy taking shots to ever be rebounding.”

“Kind of,” I said. “Al is still refusing to come to terms with the breakup. He’s super jealous of Aaron. I understand where he’s coming from though.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Because,” Violet said as we reached the second floor, “he broke up with her.”

“But you can still have deep connections and all those feelings even though you broke up with someone.”

“So why break up with the person in the first place?”

Despite my limited experience, I can still tell you that this is a hazardous, although necessary conversation that it seems all couples experience occasionally: the debate over the aspects of another friend (or friends’) relationship, specifically breakups and their aftermath. Almost without fail two people will never fully agree on in all its aspects and nuances. Couples can, and usually do, agree on things they can both like—restaurants, bands, TV shows, fashion, movies—but when it comes to other examples of relationships and messy breakups, it’s easy for the two perspectives to diverge on all the large and small nuances of this phenomenon.

“I don’t want to speak for Al,” I said.

“Okay,” Violet said, “but you think he can be jealous of Lydia being with Aaron?”

“You can’t expect a guy to go out with a girl for a long while, break up, and then be ready to see her gooing and gahing over someone else the next week.”

“But it’s not like Al got dumped or that it was a mutual breakup. Al dumped her. Nobody forced Al to go through this.”

“True,” I said, “but that does not mean that Al suddenly forgets he was in love with this girl and all his feeling for her.”

“He dumped her and when he did that he forfeited all his rights to be jealous. Don’t throw something away that you’re not prepared to see somebody else pick up.”

We turned a corner and saw a little girl standing in a nook of the temple. She put her finger to her mouth telling us to be quiet and whispered, “Hide and Seek.”

We tried to play it casual pretending not to see her. As we walked away she whispered, “Thanks.”

I returned to our previous conversation.

“Just because Al broke up with her don’t mean he wants to see her with someone else, especially in a week.”

“Well,” Violet said, “he was dating Lydia.”

“Good point.”

“All I’m saying is you can’t have your cake and eat it, too.”

“I agree,” I said, “but it’s not the least bit surprising that he’s feeling jealous.”

“I can see that.”

“I’d be insanely jealous if we ever broke up and you started seeing someone else.”

“You would?” Violet fluttered her eyebrows in an exaggerated fashion.

“I would.”

“How jealous would you be?”

If I ever forgot why I was here, I knew all I had to do to remind myself was look at Violet. No further explanation needed.

“Let’s just say you should be prepared to file a restraining order.”

“Awww, that means a lot.”

We hugged and kissing trying half-successfully to keep the public displays of affection down. The humor of our relationship is dry, hard to come by, and lovely. We had found ourselves wandering around the second floor while discussing Al’s jealousy over Lydia. Violet and I found ourselves in front of the Fishing Cat exhibit.

“The Fishing Cat has been seen crouching on rocks and sandbanks,” Violet read, “using their paws to scoop out fish. They’ve also been observed to seize fish with their mouths.”

“A feline badass.”

“Check out those webbed feet.”

“It’s like the cheetah of the sea.”

The glass made the wall of the cage. Half of it allowed you to see into the water. There were different kinds of fish swimming peacefully in the water. If only they knew what awaited them.

“Going back,” Violet said, “my point is that I’m able to see why Al is jealous but he should have thought more about this exact consequence before he dumped her.”

“Maybe this is something he already knew would happen. What if he did see this heartbreak or whatever you want to call it coming and considered it carefully, but decided it wasn’t best to continue on with Lydia.”

“Do you really think Al thought this far ahead?”

“It’s possible,” I said, watching the unsuspecting fish swim. “I haven’t been able to talk to him about it much. Not yet, at least. He told me he didn’t want to talk about it for a while, which I get, so I’ve been giving him space until he decides he wants to bring it up.”

“Weird thing is how well they seemed to be getting along the past couple months. Remember how they were always arguing when they first started dating?”

“Yeah,” I said, “and we’d always shrug it off and say, ‘That’s just Lydia and Al.’”

“Even how they were when we hung out at Lydia’s the week before they broke up.”

“They were all over each other.”

“When did her dad get that pool table?” Violet said. “How cool is it to have that thing in your house?”

“I know, right?” I said, immediately worrying I sounded too much like a twelve year old girl at the mall. I continued talking in a lower, controlled voice, and said, “I wonder what it was.”

“Me too.”

“The strangest thing about it is how Lydia has this huge temper so you’d figure she’d be so pissed off about getting dumped that the entire continent would have already heard her screaming the details to everyone.”

Violet pointed at another one of the large glass exhibits.

“Can we check out that?”

“Sure.”

“Pretty squirrel.”

“That’s an oxymoron.”

For this remark, I received a gentle punch on the arm.

“I think they’re cute,” Violet said. “I like the black and white and brown fur on them.”

“Damn things can’t ever color coordinate properly.

She rolled her eyes.

“It’s common knowledge that black and brown clash.”

Violet read the information plaque decided to quiz me. She asked me why Prevost’s squirrels need to be kept in glass cages instead of being fenced in. I guessed that it was to keep kids from sticking their hands in to try and touch the animals.

“Not exactly,” she said. “It’s loosely the same concept but not really.”

“What is it then?”

“This thing says that one of their defense behaviors is to urinate on tormentors.”

“Very effective,” I said.

“I would say so,” Violet said. “I think my little cousin may be part Prevost’s squirrel. Pees every time she gets upset.”

“Fionna?”

“Yeah, she’s the reason why we put plastic covers on the furniture when we have family over for Christmas or Thanksgiving.”

Violet and I circled the second floor for a short while. We took in sights of ocelots, an anteater, and a number of otters that looked like they were enjoying themselves. Finding ourselves in front of the Fishing Cat once again, there was some crouching and waiting before the hunter gracefully swooped up a fish for chow time in one fluid motion of its paw. As the sight unfolded, I felt my stomach grumble.

“Hungry?”

“We can get some food if you want, fatty,” she said. “I still want to check out the downstairs, though.”

We agreed to come back after lunch.

We ventured into the zoo, towards the lion area which is where the food is. We settled on fast food. I cautiously navigated our tray with two cheeseburgers and fries to a table ideal for viewing as Violet brought along the fountain drinks. The location was at the edge of the seating area, and also in the first row before the empty pit area separating the lions from the people and our deep fried goodness.

But this table was not chosen for a better view of those overgrown cats. In fact, we sat with our backs to the lions and before you ask, yes, we did sit on the same side of the table, next to each other

And yes, we are that couple. Sorry.

The reason we sat with our backs to the animals is that we preferred to watch the weirder beasts: the humans. Our table was a prime people watching spot.

“Why do French Fries taste so good?” I said.

“Why would you even question such a good thing?” Violet said. “Hey, check out this woman.”

She was too experienced to point. While holding her cheeseburger with both hands, she raised her eyebrows and used her eyes to signal where to look without moving her head. I followed the path of Violet’s gaze to discover a woman in her thirties with far too much make up for one person, or a dozen people for that matter.

“Her outfit,” I said. The woman was wearing black pants with a brown shirt and brown shoes. “That looks horrible.”

“All right, it isn’t extremely fashionable but it doesn’t look horrible.”

“We’ll have to agree to disagree on this one.”

“I wonder how much money she spends on makeup a month,” Violet said before taking a bite out of her cheeseburger.

“Probably had to take out a mortgage.”

“Is it just me or does she look familiar?”

“She does,” I said, unable to place her. “Do we know her from somewhere?”

We glanced over a couple more times in the most discreet of manners before Violet finally said, “I don’t think I know her, do you?”

“No, but I feel like we just saw her,” I said. “Maybe she was in the Rainforest?”

“But we would have remembered that face.”

“That’s true, but I feel like we saw her at the Rainforest even though I *know* we didn’t see her at the Rainforest.”

We gave up on the mystery and continued devouring lunch.

“So honestly,” I said in between bites, “did you think I was a moron when I took you here for our first date?”

“Not at all,” she said. “This was a cute idea.”

“Really?”

“Definitely. I liked that you wanted to do something where we could actually talk and get to know each other.”

“Isn’t that a given?”

“You’d think so,” she said

She on about how girls at her school thought the best place to take a girl on a first date. Violet explained how it wasn’t her style, because you don’t get an opportunity to actually interact with your date. You can be sitting next to a person for three hours without saying a single word to them. She brought a few cold winter nights we’d stayed in watching movies back-to-back.

“But the only reason I’m into that now is because we’re past that point of getting to know each other. Like we’re still finding out new stuff about each other, the stuff you can only find out from being around a person for a long time, but we’ve worked to get to that comfort zone and progressed into becoming a couple that watches movies and other stuff that’s meant for established relationships. And so the zoo idea was an especially good idea. It showed you were trying to get to know me first. Plus, it might not be like this at your school but I know more than a few people who have gone to the movies just so they can use the unisex bathrooms with their date.”

“Lydia mentioned those unisex bathrooms when she gave me suggestions for first dates.”

Violet wasn’t the least bit surprised. I asked her why she wasn’t.

“Because it’s Lydia.”

Made sense.

We watched a woman who had her baby in one of wraps that let parents haul their babies on their stomach. I realized we had stopped needed to point people out anymore. We just naturally watched the same passersby.

“I wonder how many virginities have gone to die in that very unisex bathroom.”

“Too many to count.” Lydia was probably responsible for most of them.

“Don’t look right now,” I said covering my mouth by pretending to wipe my mouth with a napkin. “But check out the teacher at ten o’clock.”

A frizzled looking woman who was wearing a ridiculous highlighter pink pantsuit was passing out brown lunch bags to two tables filed with little fieldtrippers.

“She’s so skinny,” Violet said.

“In a creepy way,” I said.

The woman was obviously one of those who have become all too aware of the Petri dish quality of elementary school aged children. She took great care not to touch a single one of the germ carriers. As she handed out the lunches, she would hold the brown paper bag by the tips of her fingers. If you were to remove the bag, her arm and hand would look like she was mimicking the use of a hand puppet. She passed out each bag, one for each student, by only moving her forearm and keeping her upper arm bone—I’m sure there’s a better word, something technical, for that bone which I’m too dumb to know. She looked like a construction crane as she hesitantly dropped off each package.

“Did you think I was a cheapskate when we came here on free admission day?”

“Chance, you were 15 years old. Besides I’m not the kind of girl that needs to be spent lavishly on to feel good about herself,” Violet said and began to sing softly, “I don’t care too much for money...”

She pointed to me to finish.

“Money can’t buy me love,” I sang back.

Then, of course, I had to sap it up so, readers, I warn you about and ask you to excuse me for the mushy-gushiness coming next.

I said, “And that’s what I’ve got, Violet.”

“What’s that you’ve got?”

“Love.”

See, I warned you.

I stealthily snuck in to give Violet a peck on the cheek, but she—rather smoothly I might add—snuck a turn of her head in on me and intercepted my lips with hers. She can be a sneaky one when she wants.

“Happy anniversary, Violet.”

“Happy anniversary, Chance.”

We toasted with our soft drinks. I spilled some of my pop. They don’t let anybody in the zoo have lids because of some sort of danger they pose to the animals.

“It’s been a good year,” Violet said.

And I opened up my mouth to agree but stopped when flashes of the day before flooded my mind: the pews, Father Larry, the MadLibs speech, my grandmother. Instead of saying anything, I guess I slowly closed my mouth.

Violet realized it, too.

“I shouldn’t have said that,” she said. “I’m sorry I wasn’t thinking.”

I knew and she knew what she meant, so I just hugged her. No better feeling than that.

Over Violet’s shoulder I saw the poor teacher in pink.

“Oh, Jesus,” I said. “Look at her now.”

Violet turned to look. The woman had completed the lunch bag distribution and was the victim of a broken heel on her right shoe. She was standing, more swaying unsteadily, on her left foot and grabbing at the broken shoe. It was hard to tell whether she was thinking of reattaching the heel right there or trying to take the shoe off. The teacher didn’t seem to know either and eventually gave up and hobbled to a nearby empty table.

“I think it’s more fun to watch the people than the animals. They’re so much,” Violet said, “weirder. Look, there goes the lady who puts on her makeup with a paint roller.”

“Can’t believe she thinks that a good look,” I said. “That’s got to take a couple of hour to do each morning.”

“I know why she looks familiar.”

“What?”

The woman was now looking, a bit too intently for comfort, at everybody who passed her as she waited to throw out her trash.

“Her outfit and the nervous mannerism,” Violet said. “She’s a Prevost’s squirrel.”

“You’re right.”

Violet warned me not to go near her unless I wanted to get peed on.

“I’ll keep my distance.”

We sat there way after we finished our lunch, talking on the same frequency. We had been on this same wavelength the year before, on our first date.

We talked then about our plans and dreams for the future.

“All I know is that I want to go to college,” I said, “and travel.”

“I’d love to travel. I’ve always wanted to go to London.”

“Totally,” I said. “And Rome, too.”

“Well,” she said, “if we are still in each other’s lives in a few years, let’s do it. Let’s see everything we want to see.”

She stuck out her hand and I shook it.

“What about you though?” I said. “I know I want to do something big but I’m still trying to figure out what. You’ve got more figured out though.”

“I do?” she said, being coy.

“I can see it from a mile away.”

And I was right. She wanted to stop dealing with the mismanagement of PURE by its founder and president, Margot Janzen. Violet wanted to run PURE. She told me about her plans for the organization and I know you’re hearing this from the boyfriend but honestly they were some innovative stuff. She had ambition.

“So we’re going to run PURE, I’m going to figure out what to do with my life, and in the meantime we’ll jet set?”

“Sounds good to me.”

I went to the bathroom and when I came back I saw my Violet there at our table. She patted the spot on the bench next to her.

It was a small move of patting the seat, instructing me on where to park my behind. I'm sure she didn't think twice about it. But in many ways, this instance summed up my love for her.

The spot she patted next to her: that was my spot.

In the whole entire Universe, I knew this was the exact spot where I belonged.

We sat there some more, people watching, and every particle in my body screamed, telling me this was right where I was supposed to be.

I would be right there in my spot next to Violet for as long as she'd have me.

Bad Cop, Good Cop (Concert of Entropy: Part 1)

When Christmas came around a month later, Al tried to make up for the missed concert—well, more accurately, concerts—by getting tickets to the next show in early January. This time was actually going to be Azimuth Dream's album release party. We had figured out by then that the guitarist was a childhood friend of the Grog Shop's event coordinator and the bassist had family in the East side's suburbs, Euclid or Mentor, depending on who your source was. Simply put, the band we loved would be stopping at our favorite local venue every time they crisscrossed the Midwest.

We had hit the jackpot.

Al was generous enough to buy tickets for Violet and Lydia, too. Things with him and Lydia had become much less confrontational. There was a substantial decrease of the words 'cocksucker,' 'douche,' and 'bitch' during their conversations.

There was a short period of false hope when Lydia stopped talking to Aaron. I was unable to stop Al from purchasing flowers the next day. There was more cold silence between them after Al discovered those same roses in the band hallway trash can after school. I'm pretty sure the only time they were next to each other was in study hall. They barely acknowledged the other's presence when Maury had his paternity test shows.

The day of the show, Violet came over early to have dinner at my place.

"Thanks, Mom Williams," I said with a full plate of stir fry.

"This looks really good," Violet said.

"Thank you, Violet," my mom said while fixing her own plate. "But now I need to ask you two to politely get lost. My show is about to come on."

"What show?"

"Judge Trudy."

My mother is a sucker for these reality TV shows. (Reality being the questionable term in the previous sentence.) Judge Trudy is a 'tough as nails,' 'say it like it is' small claims court judge who happens to have a TV camera or two in her courtroom. Al and I have, and still are,

trying to figure out a fake lawsuit to file against each other. If you get picked to be on the show, they fly you out to Los Angeles for free.

"My mom loves that show, too," Violet said.

"Good woman. Now, get out of here before you make me miss my show."

We obediently headed up the stairs. I put on some music, not Azimuth Dream though. I don't know about you but whenever I go to a show I try to specifically not listen to that band for a couple days before and after. It helps the music of the concert stick out in your mind clearer.

We ate on my bed.

"What time is Al picking us up?" Violet said.

"He told me 6:30."

"Chance," Violet had stopped eating, "it's 6:25 and you're not even dressed."

I glanced down at my pajama pants and white t-shirt. Not an entirely fashionable outfit, but it was also snowing that day which meant I was underdressed as well.

I said again, "Al told me 6:30."

"That means we have to leave in five minutes," Violet said. She had gotten up and was searching for her phone. "Get dressed."

"Violet," I said, still sitting, "Al said he'd be here at 6:30, *Al*."

She stopped, realizing what I was saying.

"Sorry, I got it. How long do you think we have?"

"Unsure. Let me call him."

Which I did.

"Where are you?"

"Driving, just left the house," Al said. "Should be there in 15 minutes."

"Don't forget the tickets."

I could hear Al's dog, Misty, an ankle biting Jack Russell terrier, yipping and yapping in the background the whole time. Then, I could hear his parents talking.

"Tell you parents I say hi," I said.

He said without hesitation, "Chance says hi." Another brief, muffle of voices and, "They say hi back."

"See you in 15."

"Later."

This is typical Al: never tells you where he really is.

If he's getting on the road, he'll tell you he's on your block.

If he's still at home, he'll say he's five minutes away.

If he's about to take a shower and get ready, he'll tell you he just left. You're in for quite a wait when this happens—the kind of wait where you have enough time to slowly eat dinner, get dressed, and hang out with your girlfriend for a while.

"Says he's leaving now."

"We've got plenty of time then," Violet said putting her purse back by the door and throwing her coat on the bed. "Why do we always have Al drive? I love Al but you can set your watch on him being late."

"The only reason is how comfortable his dad's big SUV is."

"That's right."

"Did you see what time the doors open?"

"Eight."

“We’ll be fine then.” My naïve words. “So you said that you’ve got some new ideas for PURE?”

There had been some squawking going on about the current head of the PURE organization, Margot Leftwich. She was the founder and naturally uncontested to lead the organization she created. However, her original ideas for PURE had been largely modeled after TRUTH: based on teens and guerilla advertising that the other founding members soon realized was not effective or sustainable with the modest, modest budget. Rumor has it there was a great deal of persuasion necessary from the other members to change Margot’s plans to bus 70 members to New York City and protest outside of some big tobacco headquarters.

It would have been a fine idea if it hadn’t already been done half a dozen times already by TRUTH with a national advertising budget. It also didn’t help Margot’s case that the cost of buses, hotels, and food was almost three times PURE’s budget at the time. This was in the first year of PURE when there was really more will, than actual way. On top of this, there had been other whisperings surrounding doubts about Margot’s leadership.

I won’t tell you who but one of the more senior members, not Violet, swears, “Margot doesn’t even care about smoking prevention. The only reason she did all this was to look good for college scholarship applications.”

And Margot did receive a full ride to Bowling Green State University, but to her credit, she drives home every other weekend and comes back in the summers to work a ton on PURE events.

“When you first came to PURE,” Violet said, “we thought we had just established our identity.”

“Targeting kids instead of teenagers.”

“An event that took so much effort to get Margot on board. She didn’t think it was necessary. It was like pulling teeth and it’s no surprise we’re getting stagnant again. You know?”

“We have done the fun station routine at every elementary school in Northeast Ohio.”

“Sometimes twice,” she said. “Carylwood asked us not to come back for another three years.”

“That’s not good,” I said with my incredible gift of observation.

“Not good at all. We’ve got grades 1-5 covered. It’ll be a couple years before all those kids are in middle school and we have a fresh batch to teach.”

“So where’s my brilliant girlfriend going to take the organization?”

For this, I was rewarded a kiss.

“When we started PURE, I was one of the younger ones but we were all in high school. Most of the new recruits are freshmen and a few eighth graders, but the founding members are getting older. With these older members, we have an opportunity to capitalize on. The others are all 18 and over. I’ll be 18 in a month, too.”

“You will?” I said.

“Forget my birthday and you will pay dearly,” she said, gently shaking a small clenched fist.

“Yes, miss.”

“Now as I was saying,” Violet said, “most of us, the founding members are legally adults. Brent, Samantha, and Greg are 21. Nichole and Margot are 22. This may seem like an insignificant detail but it’s a subtle opportunity we can take full advantage of.”

“I can’t handle the suspense,” I said. “What are you thinking of?”

Those eyes of hers lit up. She had the smirk. A kid with a secret.

“I won’t be able to do this unless Margot quits and I somehow get to be president of PURE—”

“I can see it now,” I said.

And I really did. Yes, I could see the PURE packets with Violet’s name on the cover. The expanded anti-smoking programs and boatload of Breathe Easy awards flooding our newly constructed headquarters. Images of huge tobacco corporations posted record low profits because of my Violet.

“We’re still going to stay out of TRUTH’s wheelhouse with teens but I’m going to propose a move to shift PURE’s focus for the next two years onto adults.”

My phone rang. It was Al.

“Hey,” he said, “I’m on your block.”

It was 7.

“We’ll be outside,” I said. I could hear the beeping noise the SUV makes when you turn them on. “Got the tickets?”

“They’re in my pocket. See you.”

We hung up.

“Is he on his way yet?” Violet said.

“Leaving now,” I said and got up to change from my pajamas. “So how are you planning on switching to the adult frontier?”

“The old bad cop, good cop routine.”

“Don’t you mean the old good cop, bad cop?”

“Nope,” she said. She was trying to act sinister. Her hand was twisting an imaginary mustache. “Actually, it’ll be the new bad cop, good cop routine.”

Concert of Entropy (Part 2)

Al showed up around 7:35. It was odd how we were on pace to be at the Grog Shop in time for the doors opening. Nothing like this had ever happened before, especially when Al was involved. Plus, there was another band opening up for Azimuth.

In other words, plenty of time.

Al’s SUV rounded the corner.

“He’s early,” I said, peering out the living room window.

“On time for normal people,” Violet said. “Something’s up.”

Al turned into the drive. We yelled bye to my mom. She was not happy with some Judge Trudy ruling and talking someone on the phone, telling them her beef with the ruling.

“Lydia’s not in the car.”

We looked at each other as confirmation of our suspicions and got into the backseat.

“Hey, guys,” Al said, putting the SUV in reverse.”

“Hey, Al,” Violet said. “How you doing?”

“I’m all right. Good to see you. I like that outfit.”

“Watch yourself,” I said to Al. “Is Lydia not coming?”

“She is.”

Al continued to drive. Apparently, he felt no need for further explanation.

“Then, where is she?”

“At home,” Al said. “I think.”

This explained Al's uncharacteristic earliness. See, Lydia lives about three blocks from Al on the opposite side of town. And I live right next to Warrensville Center Road, the street we need to take the whole way down to the Grog Shop. He picked us up early so he didn't have to be in the car alone with Lydia.

"Need a drink?" Al said. He took out two brewskis from a duffle bag lying on the passenger side floor.

I took his offer with sincere thanks.

"Full service," I said. I had made up my mind not to stress about picking up Lydia. We had enough time to do it and frankly this whole show was a bonus in my eyes. I didn't pay for the tickets and in the back of my mind I somehow felt the show was still out of reach. "Beer, tickets, and transportation."

"No, thanks," Violet said, waving off the beer. "I'm not going to drink tonight."

"You sure?" Al said.

"Yep. Thanks though."

"Why aren't you drinking?" I said. Not that Violet is an alchy or anything, but she usually has a couple when the atmosphere is right like shows. Her stomach seemed to be giving her trouble because she didn't have much of Robin's stir fry either. My lady is a trooper though, she's done the puke-and-rally, which is why I could tell it was really bothering her.

(For anybody needing further clarification of the lingo the kids are using nowadays:
puke-and-rally, verb: while at a social event, an individual doing heavy drink who vomits and then continues to forge on drinking.

Used in a sentence:

After 9 light domestic beers and two bathroom hookups, Lydia felt a bit queasy and decided her best option was to puke-and-rally.)

"No reason," Violet said. "Don't feel like it, that's all."

"Don't mind if I do," Al said, cracking open the beer Violet had declined.

"Al, what are you doing?" Violet said.

"Not letting a perfectly good beer go to waste."

"You're not driving then."

"I'm fine," he said. "This is only my second beer anyways."

"Al," Violet said in a tone that was all business and no bull.

"I can't. My dad's insurance doesn't cover somebody else driving if, God forbid, we were to get into a crash."

"And it covers if you get pulled over for drunk driving?"

Al couldn't argue that. He got out, Violet gave me a peck on the cheek, and they switched seats.

"Welcome to the club," I said as Al got in the backseat.

Al and I tapped our beers together and started the evening off right.

"You sure you want to drive?" I said. "This would still be open container if we got pulled over."

"It'll be fine," she said grabbing the duffle. "But hide this in the trunk and put your empties in there. People get busted for littering when they throw the cans out."

"Yes, ma'ma," Al said. He saluted Violet.

I know it might sound risky but this wasn't too much of a risk with Violet at the wheel. The girl is vibrant, young, and drop dead gorgeous, but when she's driving, it's impossible to differentiate between her and a crotchety 80 year old—in driving styles at least. We're talking two hands on the wheel at 10 and 2 sitting in a perfectly upright position with all the mirrors adjusted for maximum field of vision, of course, seat belt buckled and a blinker that's turned on 150 yards before every turn.

She's the only person I know that actually goes the speed limit.

Five beers apiece and halfway across town, Al and I found ourselves starting to ask those things you ask when you're not quite drunk and not quite sober. The slight intoxication where one is able to carry a conversation just fine, but when you pop out of your seat to use the restroom, you're surprised by the lightheadedness.

"Do you know I only came to that first PURE meeting because of you?" I said. I was looking at her in the rearview mirror."

She smiled. "No, I'm glad you did though."

"Violet?"

"Yes, Al?"

"Violet," Al said, "has Chance ever told you that my wrestling coach thinks we're gay..." He burped. "...together. He thinks we're gay together."

She held off a laugh and said, "I guess we'll just have to share, then."

"But we're not—"

"She's teasing," I said.

Al's faced showed unusual concern. Not that they look the same in a bathing suit, but it was like seeing a frown on a beauty pageant contestant. You just don't expect it. The alcohol had put him in heightened level of sensitivity.

Violet repeated it. "I was kidding, Al."

He stared out the window. Violet turned on her blinker to make a left onto Archer, Lydia's street.

"Keep going straight," Al said. Violet raised her head to look back at Al who was still staring out into nothing. "Please."

Violet turned off her blinker. "Where do you want me to go?"

"I don't care," he said. "Around the block. I'm not ready, yet."

He finally spoke up again about a mile down the road.

"What's the worst thing you guys ever did?"

Neither of us said anything, but Al didn't care.

"Coach Maynard was talking to us at practice the other day and showing us tapes from last year's matches. He had all of the upperclassmen stay after the day before to watch the same tape. He was pacing back and forth asking each of us, 'What's the worst thing you've ever done?' Some kids answered, some didn't."

Al explained how Maynard was trying to get the wrestlers to recognize their weaknesses, point out where their technique could use some work. The idea was that they would supplement their strengths by working on their weaknesses from the previous years. Violet subtly looked at me through the rearview mirror as Al told us about how when he lunged he left his left side vulnerable. He got the drill's purpose but couldn't get Maynard's question out of his head.

Al looked down and looked surprised to see the beer in his hand. He took a sip before going on.

“‘What’s the worst thing I’ve ever done?’ Here’s something. It’s not *the* worst thing I’ve ever done but it is certainly one of the worst things I’ve ever done.”

I didn’t know exactly where he was going with this, but it sure wasn’t happy fun times land.

“When I was little my mom used to work late at her job and my dad would get home from work dead tired. Like he’d always try to talk to me about my day when he picked me up from school but as soon as he sat down on the couch, he’d be lights out. Mom wouldn’t wake him up until dinner was ready. And when dad’s passed out, snoring away because he’s got a ton of work, I’d go in the backyard to shoot hoops.”

Al’s dad is a friendly guy, but you can tell he’s got a serious work ethic to him. Al has been cutting their lawn, which is a two hour adventure, ever since I met him in first grade.

“You know how the court around my hoop is dry dirt? The ground is so beat down that the grass can’t grow but on the edge of the court, if you can call it a court, is all those cracks you get with hard dry dirt.”

Violet was driving in a loop around the block.

“There’s an anthill in the one corner. It’s a big fucker, too, not the stuff you see everywhere with only one mound. This hill was actually a bunch of hills and, like, ten exits, ants pouring in and out of them constantly. It’s like the big city with all the hustle and bustle. And I was so into the little ants, I used to go out there as soon as the old man passed out and watch them carrying stuff, exploring, and building until my mom was done with supper. They were these tiny machines carrying these enormous pieces of grass or rock or whatever they found. I don’t mean there were these 7 foot blades of grass but the things were three times the size of the ants carrying them.”

Passing the same suburban homes in need of paint, we heard of the ants. We passed the same mailbox, annoyingly made to look like a flamingo with a pink head and yellow legs attached to the actual mailbox part.

“The one day, I came home with my dad and I could tell the minute I got in the car that he was having a real shitty day. Didn’t say two words to me the whole ride home. It was hard to keep my mouth shut but I didn’t want to piss him off. I kept quiet for as long as I could but I was dying to tell him I had gotten a perfect on my spelling test, studied my ass off because my mom had told me I could get one of those ant farm kits if I ever got a perfect. I was fanatic. I made flashcards and everything. You know what I’m talking about? Those ant farm kits where it’s like a fish tank but flatter and you put sand in it and the ants on the top? The, they burrow and make their miniature tunnels so you can see what’s going on below the mounds in real life. They always reminded me of those countless tunnels in the pyramids.”

This was about 10,000 times more words than Al ever spent on him and Lydia’s breakup.

“Finally, I couldn’t hold it in anymore and blurted the news out when he was laying down on the couch. He was awake. His eyes were closed but he wasn’t snoring yet. I said, ‘Dad, I got a perfect on my spelling test. Can we go to the pet store this weekend and get an ant farm like Mom promised?’ He didn’t open his eyes but he said, ‘Daddy’s tired. Go play out back.’”

“Looking back at it now, it wasn’t anything particularly mean or neglectful or that sort of thing. He was working long shifts then at the water treatment plant. He must have been exhausted and there I was bugging him about some dumb spelling test. I got so angry though. Little first grade Al went stomping into the backyard and gets it in his head that the ants are to blame. I figured they wanted me to get the ant farm in the first place, which made me study so hard for the spelling test and annoy my exhausted father who was too overworked and underpaid

to have the energy to talk about it. So I make it to the backyard and watch the ants for a while. It's weird how upset I was but still able not to flip out right away."

Violet and I continued to give each other confused looks when Al wasn't looking. And I didn't know exactly where he was going but I could feel his sadness. That's the thing about Al, he's not super eloquent but somehow he still communicates the feeling.

"I can still remember the stupid word that was tripping me up, the one I ended up spelling right to get the perfect score: smash. How funny is that? Smash, can't tell you why it was so difficult for me but it was. My mind was racing a mile a minute about ant farms, my dad, and over and over I kept hearing the letters I had recited to memory, S-M-A-S-H. It's like I short-circuited because I started spelling it repeatedly. Nonstop. S-M-A-S-H, smash, S-M-A-S-H. The next thing I know I'm right in the middle of stomping and smashing the big fucking anthill, and my mom comes and swoops me up from behind, saying 'Sweetie, don't do that. Those are living thing.' There was no anger in her voice. I could barely see her face with all the tears streaming down."

Al finished off the beer in his hand and opened up the two more, one for me.

"I wouldn't tell her why I was upset and I never ended up telling her about the perfect test, either. After that I always did my normal C- job on the rest of the spelling tests."

Al's phone rang and he picked it up after a couple rings. It was Lydia. We could hear her because she was speaking so loud, "Where the hell are you?"

"We'll be right there," he said.

23-ish (Concert of Entropy: Part 3)

As we approached Lydia's house, she came out into the road and did the hitchhiker's thumb. Violet slowed down the car and rolled down the window.

"How much?" Violet said in her gruff trucker one.

Most girls would take offense, if only momentarily, to an implication that they were a prostitute. Not Lydia, though. She had humor crude enough to offend most sailors.

Lydia pretended to take in Violet and said, "For you, honey, I'll do it for free. If you're really into the nasty stuff, all I ask is that you hold me afterwards."

"Jesus," Violet said. "Get in." She reached across to open the passenger door.

"How do I know you're not a cop?"

"Get in the car you hooker."

Lydia let go of the joke and got in. The smell of whiskey filled the car as she shut the door behind her.

"Want some?" Lydia extended an open flask toward the middle of the SUV, offering it equally to anyone.

I held up my beer to show I was good. Al weakly waved off the flask. Violet explained again she was the designated driver for the night.

It was a little past eight. The opening band would be going on around 8:30 and we had about a thirty minute drive. Still good on time.

"How's everybody doing?" Lydia said. "Ready for some good tunes?"

"Yes sir," Violet and I said.

Al didn't make a peep. Like in study hall when he pretended to watch commercials for life insurance and electrician's college, Al kept staring out the window at houses, local businesses, and other things that didn't matter to him.

"Oh, c'mon," Lydia said.

She shook Al's knee to get him to make eye contact. They stared at one another. Lydia started out with a uniquely drunk glare where her head wasn't shaking but it was slightly moving and her eyes had that happy carefree look Lydia always gets when the booze starting to kick in. But the look in her eyes sharpened and her head stilled.

"Can we just be okay?" Lydia said.

Al started to look down.

"For me." Her voice was more desperate.

Al nodded.

Lydia said, "Thank you."

We were stopped at a light. I jumped in to try and switch gears.

"Anybody need a beer?"

Lydia and Al both took a can.

"How about a drinking game?" I said.

Everybody was receptive to this proposal.

"Kings?" Lydia said.

"We don't have cards," Al said. "I'd say Quarters but that won't work in a moving vehicle."

There was a short silence of brainstorming.

"How about *Never Have I Ever*?" Lydia said.

"Sounds good."

Never Have I Ever is a simple, yet great game. If you get nothing else out of this whole story, you will at least be able to play this game in your spare time.

To those of you who've never *Never Have I Ever*'ed, here are the basic rules. Going clockwise, you tell the group one thing you've never done. Then, anybody playing who has done the stated event is required to take a drink.

It tends to start out innocently enough (much like MadLibs does. i.e. 'Never have I ever been to Europe', 'Never have I ever been blonde', etc.) but as it progresses and the participants get more and more intoxicated, the statements get more graphic in nature.

At least with my friends and me it seems to.

Get the gist?

"Are you going to play, Violet?"

She held up a bottle of pop Lydia had brought as a mixer but didn't need.

"Good enough. I'll go first," Lydia said, "Never have I ever peed standing up."

Al and I drank.

"Never have I ever been suspended for being drunk in English class at 10 in the morning," Violet said.

"Nice one," Al said.

Lydia, Al, and I had to drink. It was one time, actually the first time I had ever been legitimately stinking drunk. It was our freshman year, before we had figured out how to bet money on Maury. In a rare set of circumstances, we found out the teachers for our first three class periods were sick from food poisoning—some undercooked chicken sandwiches in the

teacher's lounge—and with substitutes there's a huge advantage in the fact of them not knowing what anyone in class looks like and, more often than not, not caring.

Most throw in a movie or give busy work and pass around an attendance sheet for us to sign. We got Jimmy, who Lydia was talking to at the time, to sign our names for all three classes and watched a Morning Mini Maury Marathon. Like I said, we hadn't figured out how to gamble with dollars so we had the losers of bets drink.

By 9 AM we were feeling it and Coach Maynard snuck us in right before the 10 o'clock bell: fourth period English.

We might have gotten away with it if I hadn't been called on to read that day.

"Would you mind reading this section, Chance?" Ms. Landsdale said.

"Me?"

"Yeah, you Chance. You have such a nice flowing reading voice."

"Sure," I said getting up slowly.

I was looking at the page but saying nothing.

"Where did you want me to start?"

"The last paragraph on page 52."

"Okay. There was," I had said trying to collect my focus, "There was dancing now on the candies, I mean, canvas in the garden, old men pushing young girls backward in eternal graceless circles—"

Lydia, unfortunately sat behind me, was behind me and out of Ms. Landsdale's sight.

"Dirty old perverts," she whispered.

"...and a great number of, umm, single girls dancing induh-, individualistically or relieving the orchestra for a moment of the burden of the banjo—"

"Country bumpkin hicks with banjos," Lydia said.

"A pair of stage 'twins'—who turned out to be the girls in yellow—did a baby act in costume and champagne was served in glasses bigger than fish bowls."

"I bet you," Lydia whispered, "those perverts loved those girls wearing diapers."

Al, who was to the right of us, started cracking up and then we started cracking up. The next thing, we were in the assistant principal's office.

It was Al's turn in our game.

"Never have I ever had a period," Al said, retaliating against the girls.

"But you have PMS'ed," Lydia said under her breath.

Violet and Lydia drank.

We were on our way and still only a few minutes late to see the opening act. All of us were getting along. We were about to finally see Azimuth Dream. It felt good.

Lydia's flask went empty as the three of us took final swigs from it and the case was also getting much lighter. The conversation and the game started turning a little more, if you will, afterhours.

"Never have I ever," Lydia said, "thrown up during sex."

My eyes scrunched, not knowing the story Lydia was alluding to. Violet glanced at me inquisitively and I shrugged my shoulders. We all turned our attention to Al, who was not taking a sip.

"Al..." Lydia said drawing out his name and emphasizing the accusation in her tone.

"I did not," Al said, sitting up in his seat, "regurgitate during sex. We were having sex. I started to feel sick. I got up and went to the restroom and threw up."

"Are you kidding me?" Lydia said.

“You were there. That’s what happened.”

“I know that’s what happened. You threw up when we were having sex.”

“No,” Al said, “we were having sex and then I threw up. It wasn’t like I was mid-thrust when I vomited.”

“All right. If that’s how nitpicky you’re going to be, did we not continue to have sex after you came back?”

Al turned silent again.

“Just because,” Lydia said, continuing, “we were having sex and stopped doesn’t mean we were done. Hence, You threw up *during* sex.”

Al looked at me. I think he hoped I would be backing him up for support but I didn’t know how to even begin such a thing even if it was for my best friend.

“I still don’t agree with you, but for the sake of the game, I’m going to take a half sip.”

“You kept having sex?” I said to Al.

“I felt way better after I puked.”

“You had sex with Mr. Puke Breath?” Violet said to Lydia.

“We didn’t kiss,” Lydia said.

“It’s not like I didn’t chew some gum, either.”

“First off,” I said, “gross. Second off, whose turn is it?”

“I just went,” Lydia said.

“Never have I ever,” Violet said. She was searching for something to use. “Still cannot believe you guys kept going at it after that. Never have I ever fallen asleep in the parking lot and missed the concert I was going to.”

“Now you guys are just ganging up on me,” Al said. He took a drink. “Never have I ever had sex with only one person.”

Violet and I drank. Lydia gave Al a high five. They thought our lack of promiscuity was a hoot.

“I can’t believe that you two are okay with that,” Lydia said. “It’s like you’re already married and only going to get it on with one person forever.”

“Bet they don’t even know what they’re doing,” Al said, laughing still. “Do you guys know there’s other stuff out there besides missionary?”

I started to open my mouth to answer but Violet gave me a serious look which said: don’t you dare answer that question.

“Do you guys have to put down roses and shut off the lights before the fun begins?”

Another question I was smart enough not to answer.

It was my turn. Al started this.

“Never have I ever,” I said looking around the SUV, “had sex with more than twenty people.”

Al chuckled and repeated, “Twenty, haha.” He stopped laughing when Lydia took a drink. “Really?”

Instead of responding, Lydia said, “Never have I ever taken a pack of cigarettes out of a stranger’s hand and stepped on them.”

Violet drank. My little activist.

We were getting close to the venue. It was 8:50.

“Never have I ever,” Violet said, turning on her blinker, “been kicked out of school for laughing at a guest speaker.”

“Happy to drink to that,” Lydia said. “Lady had it coming to her.”

“Which assembly are we talking about?” Al said.

“The abstinence one.”

“Oh yeah,” Al said. “That lady was ridiculous, said the first time she had sex she got pregnant even though the guy was wearing a condom and pulled out.”

“And remember,” I said, “how she claimed that during this same sexual encounter she got something like four—”

“Four STDs,” Lydia said. “What kind of guy was this with four STDs and magically potent sperm?”

“I’d imagine he’d be easy to spot,” Al said, “with a patchy little beard and a trench coat.” We passed the Grog Shop on our way to park.

“Never have I ever,” Al said, giving me a squinty sideways glance, “been caught looking at porn by my own mother.”

I couldn’t believe it. I had told Al it in confidence, even Violet didn’t know.

I reluctantly drank. Violet gave me a smile that was both sympathetic and holding back laughter. Lydia and Al, on the other hand, were cracking up so hard they could barely breathe.

Again, he provoked it. Sorry, Al.

“Never have I ever,” I said, “not known exactly how many people I’ve slept with.”

Which I knew Lydia wouldn’t be mad about. She could talk about her sex life with the Pope without feeling uncomfortable.

This time Al didn’t try to laugh it off. His eyes widened and he watched Lydia take another drink.

“That’s unfair,” Lydia said, “because you two only have to keep track of one person and he’s had a few but not more than he can count on his hands.” And she was about to keep going on without missing a beat, “Never have I ever—”

“How many?” Al said.

Lydia took a second to come up with the number. Her eyes went up like she was trying to look at the top of her forehead. Her head bobbed slightly with each number she mouthed. I think she might have restarted the count getting confused somewhere in the teens.

“23...ish.”

“-ish?”

“Yes, -ish.”

“Where are you coming up with this -ish business?” Al couldn’t let it go. This was the kind of question one might want to ask, but it probably better off without the answer.

“-ish, because I don’t remember them all,” Lydia said. “Sue me. I can’t be sure because I was super drunk for one.”

Violet pulled the SUV into a parking spot.

“At the risk of making us late,” Al said, “try to remember.”

“You want me to list them off?”

“Why not?”

Learn from us, dear reader. Don’t ask questions you don’t want the answer to.

“Well there was you of course,” she said and took a big breath before continuing, “and George, John A., Tommy, James, Jimmy, John Q., Andy, Martin. Then, there was those two summers when I went to go visit my mom in Georgia. So add Ryan, and Matt, Chuck, Dave, Craig, Brandon, Mike, Steve and Steven.”

She paused and said, “How many is that?”

What a great line.

“Eighteen,” Al said in a distant voice. He proceeded to chug down his beer until it was almost empty.”

“I almost forgot about the times I visited my sister at school in Akron. So count Will, John T., Jim, and Zach.”

“Twenty-three,” Violet said. This time she had been counting along on her fingers.

Violet, smartly, kept her eyes on the road. I paid more attention to my beer than most do to a ballgame on television.

“This is where my –ish comes in,” Lydia said. “Remember that time I went to Seattle for a week because my dad had a business trip? I met this guy at the pool one day, Frank. We bought some bottles of pop out of the vending machine and mixed them with a lot of whiskey he brought down from his room. We hung out by the pool all day and got wasted. I don’t really remember going up to his room but we woke up naked, but the thing is, neither of us knew if we did it or not. From how the situation looked downstairs, I don’t think we did. Hence, 23ish.”

“Everybody ready?” Before anybody responded, he said, “Good. Let’s go before we’re late again.” He rushed out of the car.

When Al’s door shut behind him, Lydia said in a whisper. “To be honest, I think I’m still forgetting a few.”

(Concert of Entropy: Part 4)

Al and I followed the girls, who were a couple paces ahead of us making a left out of the parking lot. The Grog Shop was only a few hundred yards away.

And they were going to be playing new songs on their EP, *Using Lies to Tell You the Truth*.

“Here you are, sir,” Al said, handing me my ticket.

“Surreal,” I said. “What are you hoping they play?”

“I’m rooting for *Ancient Television*.”

“It’s either that or *Cinematic Sleep*.”

“You only like *Cinematic Sleep* because it commemorates your first trip to Funkytown.”

I had forgotten about telling Al about that story. Al continued on, though.

“The best part of them being so new is that they’ll have time to play all of their songs.”

We walked up to Violet and Lydia who had their tickets in hand, waiting on us.

“Ready?” Lydia said.

“Hell yes.”

A crowd of people started coming out of the Grog Shop. Too much to be the normal crowd of in-between set smokers. We weaved through the masses and struggled to get to the second set of doors.

I spotted Greg, a kid in our grade, who was walking with the flow of people. He’s a huge local music scene fan and usually an easygoing guy—“heavy on the pot, light on the worries” is his motto—but he was abnormally frustrated looking.

Temporarily, we were stuck next to the second set of doors. For a second, I thought we might have somehow missed the show, but it was 8:55, way before Azimuth would have come on whether or not there was an opener.

Greg was getting ready to light a cigarette.

“Greg,” Al shouted. “What’s going on?”

Greg saw us but was unable to stop because of the moving crowd, he yelled back, “Look at the door.”

A piece of paper was taped to the glass door. It said:

**Tonight’s show has been cancelled. AD would like to apologize to their fans.
Tonight’s tickets will be redeemable at the rescheduled Azimuth Dream show.**

The voices of those around us started to become clear from their original white noise. I don’t think I had been paying attention to any of them at first because I had been so focused on finally seeing Azimuth Dream.

I heard things like:

“Are you kidding me?”

“I heard the lead singer was a bit of a drama queen.”

“Yeah, I heard him and the drummer got into a fist fight during the show in Philly.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Hope there wasn’t an overdose.”

“What stuff?”

“I’ve heard everything from cocaine to injecting rat poison.”

“Jesus.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

Al yelled something back to Greg about catching up later and we turned around with our shoulders slumped.

We were all deflated. Violet didn’t even stop to tell the smokers outside the venue about the damage they were doing to their lungs. Lydia didn’t tease Al about missing another show. Even though it wasn’t his fault, Lydia tends to capitalize on these moments. He might have seen it but I couldn’t tell. If he did, his eyes didn’t show any recognition.

We loaded back into Al’s SUV.

“Anybody see the latest *National Enquirer*?” Lydia said.

The three of us looked at her. She would ask this from time to time as if she didn’t already know the answer.

“I read an article in it about John Edwards.”

“The dead preacher?” Violet said. “Fire and brimstone dude?”

“No—” Lydia said.

“No, John Edwards isn’t dead,” Al said. “He’s that psychic on TV, talks about dead people. What’s the name of that show?”

“Oh, I know what you’re talking about,” I said.

“Your mom used to watch that,” Violet said to me. “What was that called?”

“*Crossing over*,” Al said.

“That’s it,” I said. “Wasn’t that show cancelled?”

“Wrong guy again,” Lydia said. “This is the guy running for President. He was the vice presidential nominee for John Kerry in 2004”

“Yeah,” Violet said. “He’s third in the polls now behind Obama and Hillary Clinton.”

“Well, the *Enquirer* caught him having an affair with some blonde woman who was working with the campaign.”

We pulled out of the parking lot and started our slow retreat home.

“Doesn’t his wife have cancer?” Al said.

“Yeah,” Lydia said. “Breast cancer.”

“Isn’t she the ketchup heiress?” Violet said.

I said, “What’s a ketchup heiress?”

“A ketchup heiress,” Lydia said, as if she were already prepared for this question to come, “is a woman who marries a member of the Heinz ketchup corporate empire, whose husband then dies and leaves you boatloads of money. However, John Edward’s wife is Elizabeth Anania. Elizabeth is not a ketchup mogul widower. You guys are thinking of John Kerry’s wife, Teresa Heinz.”

You catch all that? Neither did I.

“So the *National Enquirer* has been tracking down this slimy candidate Edwards whose wife is in the middle of chemotherapy and they catch him at some hotel with this other woman. Apparently, he also got a—what was the word they used—“

Lydia pulled a folded *National Enquirer* and searched through it.

“Lovechild,” Lydia said triumphantly. “He’s got a lovechild with this blonde mistress.”

She held up that same blurry picture from before, the one with a brown haired man of Edwards’ proportions holding a baby.

“That could be anyone,” Al said.

“Are you serious?” Lydia said. “That’s clearly him.”

Lydia looked to Violet for support. Violet forced an uncomfortable grin and said, “Sorry.”

“Chance?”

I stared down at the paper. It did look like John Edwards but the picture could have been anyone. Edwards looks like the definition of an average white politician in the South. On the color spectrum of unique appearances, this guy was beige. Lydia couldn’t catch a break from us.

“Okay,” Lydia said, “so the picture isn’t as clearly focused as it could be. But they caught the scumbag in the same hotel where this woman—”

She scanned the article again.

“At the same hotel this Rielle Hunter was staying at and you know what Edwards did? He ran into a bathroom stall and called hotel security to escort the reporters out. Chicken shit. Isn’t that crazy?”

“That certainly is the correct term for it,” Al said.

In no time flat, Lydia’s expression went from sincere enthusiasm to pissed off. Lydia can be a kid on the night before Christmas when she tells us about a new conspiracy or *National Enquirer* article she’s read. Before they broke up, Al used to be smart enough—care enough—not to poke at the reasons not to believe in such things.

“Why do you always have to be such a fucking complete asshole?” Lydia said. “You can’t be nice and let me tell you about something I read without calling me crazy? And don’t think I’m not aware of how much of a chicken shit you are just like John Edwards. Chance, pass me a beer.”

I couldn’t have gotten that beer to her fast enough.

“Never have I ever,” Lydia said, cracking it open, “been such a pussy that I couldn’t be alone in the same car as my ex and instead drove all the way across town and back so I didn’t have to endure any awkwardness that I—not my ex—is causing.”

Silence.

“Come on,” Lydia said, extending the beer to Al. “You can have a big gulp of mine if you need to.” He didn’t respond. “Not thirsty? It’s okay. I can drink for you.”

She turned around and started chugging. Needless to say the conversation was a little sparse after that.

I let my mind wander about that day's events. I wondered how long it would be until Azimuth Dream made another appearance in Cleveland and what exactly made Lydia such a sucker for supermarket tabloid stories. The only reason I didn't say something about the John Edwards story being crazy was I knew I didn't want to get on Lydia's bad side. Maybe I thought having more sexual partners than your age is not the best way of going about it, but Lydia's wrath is no small thing. The first time I saw Lydia in first grade she was at recess. She was sitting on a kid named Roger's chest and punching his face.

Roger switched schools soon after and no one's seen him since.

I kept thinking about Al's story about the ant hill. I'd done the same thing too when I was little but Al didn't seem like he was in a mood to talk about shared childhood experienced.

I would have thought it was just me if Al hadn't said it, but maybe it's like jerking off. Most guys do it but it's not exactly a conversation starting point.

The difference was that I didn't do it because of some traumatic childhood memory involving my dad. I used to smash anthills at the playground of my old daycare out of boredom. Agreeing with little Al, the creatures are something to watch. You ever wonder if you would have gotten along with the people in your life at other ages?

Young Chance had taken little paw one day and smashed down the hill for, well, lack of other ideas of how to pass the time. It was then that I realized the incredible power I held over my smaller counterparts. The ants scattered frantically at the catastrophe.

I had caused a widespread disaster.

Frankly, young Chance was impressed with the destruction he was able to cause, but he was surprised most at the resiliency of the bugs. They scrambled for a bit, dug out the survivors inside, and then started rebuilding the hill without delay.

At first, I watched the reconstruction and organization of the ants intently. It was all very fascinating, especially to a kindergartener waiting to get picked up. The hill was rebuilt again and I became bored again. I wanted to see how determined the little ants were.

So I smashed the hill again.

This time I added to the devastation: too add to the drama, I squashed a few of the ants. The same chaos of the first time ensued but they remained resilient. Again, they rebuilt.

So I watched until it looked like they were finished.

You see where this is going.

I started becoming annoyed with the fact that they kept persisting. Now, I wanted my demolition to be permanent. This kept on going for some time. (I suppose my mom was running late that day.) When my mom made it to pick me up, I looked down at the ants and shrugged. They had won their right to keep going.

And that was that.

On the silent ride home, I started thinking about God. What if he doesn't have the good intentions of teaching us right from wrong with all the disease, violence, and famine? All these people might be misinterpreting His, Her, or Its actions as lessons.

What if God was like little Al or young Chance?

Maybe God just happens to be bigger, more powerful than us. Isn't it plausible that all the disasters and wars aren't inflicted on the human race with good intentions?

Maybe the disease and crime and whatnot is God just smashing the ant hill. I was so surprised by how resilient those little bastards were. The human species is remarkable that way too, the way we rebuild and restart after catastrophes.

What if God is just surprised and entertained at our resiliency?

Maybe God started out with violence. Too small, not enough action. Next came primitive warfare. Then that got boring so organized warfare. Of course that got to boring so let's introduce modern warfare and give guerilla warfare a try.

Can anything be more inhumane? More entertaining?

Ah yes: biological warfare.

God thought it might be fun to watch a world war. God thought it would be too horrible for the humans to endure but we surprised God. So he decided to make some popcorn, pull up a chair, and have a second world war. Thought genocide and nuclear bombs would be too miserable for us to want to go on.

But we did.

God had already invented disease so why not put them in war? God had already given us the knowledge of suicide and bombs, why not combine the two?

Unfortunately, or fortunately depending who you ask, we'll probably make it through these fucked up atrocities. And God will again be surprised at our resiliency.

All the devastation and strife, death and disease, rape and crime, my grandmother's death and my family's current pain, war and violence, the Holocaust and the invention of genocide, and the rest of it...

What if it's just entertainment for God?

Escape

Violet couldn't stay too late after Al dropped us off. (Don't worry, he was sobered up by then. Lydia might have single-handedly scared out any intoxication Al might have still had.) Violet had a doctor's appointment the next morning.

"Everything okay?"

"Yep," Violet said, "I'm fine."

"What are you going for?"

"Girl stuff."

"Enough said. You okay, though?"

"Baby, I'm fine. Stop asking."

Ladies, if you want to end a conversation instantly with you man, say a phrase like "It's girl stuff," or "Having girl trouble." It's like a natural form of Executive Privilege: nobody questions you after you say it.

My mom was asleep and I was still wide awake. The adrenalin from the concert excitement was still in my veins. I wasn't mad at Azimuth Dream. Hell, they'd only ditched me once, I'd done it to them three times already, albeit temporarily.

I decided to go into my room and listen to the music I had been denied for the evening, *Using Lies to Tell You the Truth*. There was no longer any reason for me to not listen to it since it'd be at least a couple of months before the rescheduled show at the Grog Shop. The EP was only six tracks long, almost 23 minutes according to my computer.

It was the first time I had been alone and awake since my uncle had showed up to pick me up from school on Monday. The entire week seemed like forever and a total blur. I had lost some money on paternity tests, lost my grandmother to Alzheimer's, punched my great aunt, been subdued by a former prison guard turned funeral director, went to the zoo with my girlfriend to celebrate a full year together, and missed yet another Azimuth Dream show.

If they sounded half as good as their EP, Azimuth would be worth the wait.

My hand felt pretty much healed by that point. I wondered about Laverne. Had her nose healed? Would it be permanently bent? A tiny but strong piece of me wanted it to be permanently slanted.

She had learned the dangers of wearing teal and talking shit at your sister's wake. I had simply provided the lesson.

The music was loud and full. It was really convenient for both my mom and me to have our bedrooms on different floors for late nights like this. I like loud music and she likes peaceful quiet. Robin's a great mom. I don't think I've said much of this yet, but there was so, so, so much she did to get us to where we are.

When my dad Charlie left, Robin sent out resumes to every school district in Ohio. Monday would be to a school an hour west, Tuesday would be another forty minutes northeast, Wednesday an hour fifteen south, Thursday twenty-five minutes east, and Friday another hour west. Aunt Cheryl and Uncle Jeff would watch me afterschool when my mom went to her second job.

For a while she worked at a department store making the sales posters in markers. My aunt and I went in once to see her. Robin was covered in marker. The signs were of various animals with talk bubbles like the ones in comic strips. There would usually be a pun on whatever animal was talking about the sales.

A lion would say, "I'm not *lion* to you, we have the lowest prices on cosmetics."

I can remember not knowing exactly what being on food stamps meant. Young Chance thought it was amazing turning in these stamps and getting food in return. To me, it was like taking play money and getting a big screen television in return. On top of whatever number of jobs she was working on a given day, she still had the harder job of being a parent when she got home.

I wouldn't know the reasons for it, but she'd come home tired and frustrated by the seemingly endless cycle of working and paying bills with probably feeling that there was no time to take a breath, and I could tell she wasn't her happiest, so I'd play a play something that might vaguely resemble a song on my toy piano to cheer her up. And she'd come over and swoop me up. I think we both felt that everything was going to be all right as long as we had each other.

I could feel myself getting lost in the music. Thinking and not, simultaneously. Somebody said once that music was the only proof he needed for the existence of God. Sometimes that sounds about right.

Violet had been in cheer-up mode during our zoo date. She was so kind and sweet. The whole thing had been nice but it didn't feel like a proper anniversary date. You need somebody who can adjust and pick up the slack when you don't feel strong enough to pull the load. She's great like that.

I wanted to have a redo. Show her how much she really did mean to me. I pulled out my phone and sent her a text message, Snooty snoot drive and nice dinner after your appt?

Sounds great but what's the occasion?

I want a do over. Romance up the anniversary. Sorry I was off at the zoo.

You're cute, she sent back. Don't worry about the zoo. Second try at first anniversary?
Exactly. No worries this time. Get to sleep.
Night.

I was still trying to process the week.

Al and Lydia were deteriorating fast. What I've told you so far sounds like a far cry from the love and happiness somebody might want out of a relationship. The two of them had both changed a lot when they went from being single to a couple. I mean, it's inevitable everybody does to a certain extent but they had more than most. They were the drastic "After" pictures in commercials for weight loss programs, the ones holding up pants 10 sizes too big.

And it was in generally good ways that Al and Lydia changed.

They still drank whenever possible and fought, but Al might be the only person Lydia's ever been yelled at who did not get punched out by Lydia—boy or girl.

And Al started to be on-time to things when he had dates with Lydia. He's still be an hour late to any group things we did, but he'd drop whatever he was doing to be wherever Lydia and he were supposed to be.

The whole *National Enquirer* stuff, everybody I know just listens to Lydia's latest findings to, smartly, avoid her wrath. It really isn't too bad, either. A little bit of obvious ridiculousness and tabloid speculation never hurt anybody. Elvis spotted having a grilled cheese sandwich with Big Foot. Noah's ark discovered inside an amusement park.

Al had started to really take interest in them though. He wasn't just listening and letting it go in one ear and out the other like the rest of us. At the lunch table, the two lovebirds would be talking about the JFK assassination in excruciating detail.

Lydia had never been with anyone for more than a week before Al. She'd get bored, not be able to hang out with the same person consistently. Lydia stuck around Al all the time though and when I'd hang out with Al, he'd be constantly getting calls from you know who. I don't think I can do justice in explaining how much of a 180 this was for Lydia.

She once dumped a guy because he'd asked her to call him.

I believe her exact response was "I'm not married."

The EP was on its last track. My personal favorite, for reasons you already know, *Cinematic Sleep*. Six minutes and 15 seconds of plain old good.

My mom and I would have to get up super early in the mornings, earlier when she had a long drive. It was usually still dark when we'd leave for my daycare and then whatever school she'd be working at. The stars would still be out to watch on our ride. The moon would be out sometimes. Robin would tell me in the car about how Charlie used to go out and watch the moon.

My mom told me about how Charlie and she were walking around campus one evening with not a thing to do. They'd sat down at a bench and talked. It must have been early on because they were asking the Dreams and Aspirations type questions that tend to come out early on in a relationship.

"I always wanted to be a dolphin trainer," Robin had said to Charlie. "Go to school for Marine Biology."

"That's quite a leap from Education," he said.

“Yeah,” she said. “In a way, I’m still working with wild creatures. It’s so expensive for the school with so few jobs available. Plus, I wasn’t sure I wanted to move away from Ohio forever.”

To this day, my mother still loves the ocean.

She told me about how he’d originally gone into physics because he wanted to work for NASA after the moon landings (which Lydia will be more than glad to explain never actually happened).

She asked Charlie, “Why physics?”

“That,” Charlie said, pointing at the moon. “I couldn’t believe that human being had left and stepped foot on the face of the moon. I still don’t. But it wasn’t the astronauts who impressed me. Before astronauts, they used to use chimps. It was the guys on the ground who figured out how to launch a rocket in Florida and how to use the moon’s gravity to slingshot it back to Earth at an angle that doesn’t burn the thing to a crisp.”

“So is that what you’re going to do after graduation? Work for NASA?”

“No, that ship has sailed. NASA isn’t as ambitious as they were back then. It’s all shuttle missions to do experiments. They’ve lost their drive towards real exploration. I wouldn’t want to be crunching numbers all day long so some shuttle can orbit the Earth for a few days to see how frogs adjust to zero gravity. I want to discover something.”

The night I was born, Charlie probably went home with a good deal of whiskey in his system. He got back to his apartment and went inside to grab a new pack of cigarettes out of the carton he used to buy in bulk, and walked outside to the street a bit wobbly.

Charlie sat there on the curb, smoking continuously, lighting the new ones with the ends of the old ones when they were down to the filter, wanting to be the astronaut for once. He stared at the moon as he always did. The news of me had come when Charlie ran into a mutual friend of Robin and his at the bar.

There was a child out there. He knew it was his. He was having trouble accepting this fact. He was having even more trouble denying it.

Charlie dreamed of setting down on the lunar surface and getting out to explore for a bit. He and his shipmates taking samples and when it was time to get back in the ship and leave for Earth, he’d say, “No. I think I’d rather stay.”

I listened until the EP was over. I tried to sleep but there was a pull to go outside.

This was not the first time I had gone out late to gaze at the moon. I still got up early after Robin got a permanent position and we didn’t have to get up early anymore. I’d go outside and watch the moon.

Despite all the times I looked up at the moon, somehow I knew Charlie wasn’t looking up at the same time I was. Maybe he wasn’t because he was tired from a long day at the lab and unwinding in front of the television. He could have been getting up early to read the paper and had a few cigarettes before the day started. But the night of the cancelled Azimuth Dream show, I could feel him.

We were both staring at the moon. Together and separate.

Charlie was smoking cigarette, but he’d never seen any reason to quit because there hasn’t been any health repercussions for him.

No heart trouble.

No emphysema.

Teenaged Charlie started smoking only two packs a week. At age 20, he worked his way up to five. Since the age of 26 when he’d met Robin he’d been a certifiable chain smoker.

No elevated blood pressure.
 No cough.
 Not even a little shortness of breath in the entire 41 years.
 I looked at the moon for who knows how long and knew what I had to do: find Charlie Laplace.

Remember the Time

The next morning, I woke up around 10 and walked down stairs. My mom was reading a thick novel from the library, one of those with the laminated book cover.

She looked up and said, "There's sleeping beauty."

"Morning," I said, sitting in the chair next to her.

She asked a question that had been avoided by both of us since the funeral.

"How's you doing?"

"Better," I said, a little surprised that this was the truth. "You?"

"Better, too."

She dog-eared the page she was on and put it on the end table between us. Then she stared out towards the living room.

"What's on your mind?" I said.

Robin said, "I keep thinking about when Aunt Cheryl was born. I'd forgotten completely about it until Cheryl brought it up when we were going through grandma's old pictures yesterday. Grandma took me sledding when her water broke. From then on, I should have known she would always be interrupting my fun."

"It wasn't that bad, was it?"

"There was a piece of tape down the middle of our bedroom," my mom said, raising a fist. "She was not to cross it."

"And you say I'm bad at sharing," I said. "Remember the time I smashed my hand in the car door?"

"Yeah," my mom said. "Mom, I mean, Grandma was watching you because I was working at that restaurant."

"While you were substitute teaching?"

"It was only on Friday and Saturday nights. I forget how you even got your hand stuck."

My mother is a Superwoman in disguise.

"It was in the winter," I said. "And we were driving back to my place in that little hatchback maroon car she used to have. I don't know where we were coming from but I was babbling on and on about cartoon superheroes then."

"You were obsessed with karate because of that Ninja Turtle show."

Guilty as charged. Back then, you could find me practicing wheelhouse kicks and honing my skills with fake numb chucks. (They were built out of paper towel rolls stuffed with newspaper, attached with string.) In my mind, I was a black belt.

"We're getting out of the car in our old driveway," I said. "I got out, turned around, and positioned myself to attack the door. So I load up my strike by leaning forwards towards the car with my left hand fully extended and my right hand drawn back and I say, 'Watch, Grandma.' Then, I hit the thing with my right hand at full speed. My left hand wasn't out of the way though. It was stuck in the door."

Robin audibly inhaled through her clenched teeth. A universal reaction meaning: ouch.
 “The worst part of it was that the door was locked.”

This happened before cars had automatic locks. I can only recall small flashes of the incident. The next think I knew, my grandmother was next to me, trying to unlock it as I was screaming at the top of my lungs. In her panic, she did drop the key ring in the snow.

“She always had a million keys like she was a janitor or something.”

“Once she finally had the right key, I started running around the car out of shock. She finally grabbed me and stuck my hand in this snow pile. I started screaming more so we hurried inside and put my hand under water. Oh, that burned so bad.”

I could feel almost feel the same rush of pain in my hand. I’ve heard about parts of the body holding information, actually remembering stuff, the way the mind does. Lydia had told me about an uncle of hers who’d had a heart transplant. He never liked chicken nuggets before, maybe ate them once a year. Then, after the transplant, this guy all of the sudden gets these massive craving for chicken nuggets. He doesn’t think too much of it for the longest time which is understandable because he’s just gotten a new lease on life, what does he care about some odd cravings?

Eventually, this guy meets the family of the dead guy’s heart he’s got in him. He becomes friends with the family and one day they’re out grabbing a quick lunch and he orders nuggets. The wife of the dead guy makes a small comment about how the dead guy used to love chicken nuggets. He talks to his doctor and finds out there a number of cases like this where the transplant recipients

“You know,” my mom said, “I saw you when I came home and didn’t notice the little wrap on your hand until she told me about all of that. But you didn’t say a thing. It was like you already forgot the whole thing. You were practicing your karate moves at full speed.”

As we laughed, it didn’t seem like the woman we were talking about was dead. It was nice.

“I miss her,” Robin said.

“Me too.”

The mood had shifted, as it did in the SUV when Al told us his own ant story. There was always this awkwardness in my conversations right after my grandmother’s death with other family members. We both understood why it was there. In all the talks, there was an uncertainty about how much to talk about the obvious thing. It was like the way Al had explained the conversations between him and Lydia after they broke up.

He said the breakup itself would get mentioned but more often than not danced around. It wasn’t like either of them had forgotten what’d they lost, and were working to find their way around this new reality. Sometimes Al wanted to bring it up but he’d be unsure if it was where Lydia’s mind was. He didn’t want to bring it up out of nowhere.

My mom said, “Hungry?”

“Yes.”

We headed into the kitchen. She started to talk about school and crazy happenings.

“I got a call this morning from Mrs. Branson, the teacher across the hall from my room.”
 My mom was cracking eggs as she said this. “Apparently, the knuckleheads went crazy for the few days I was gone. One of the substitutes burst into tears and they had to get another one on Wednesday to finish out the rest of the week.”

“Jeez.”

She handed me a bagel from on top of the fridge. I put it in the toaster.

“Did I tell you about the poor little girl in my class, Zoe?”

“No,” I said. “What about her?”

“You know about the fundraiser we had for our sports jerseys?”

I nodded. Her school had given the kids candy bars to sell and raise money for the school’s sports and music programs. It happened every year, and luckily, my mom is generous enough to buy a good portion of whatever the kids haven’t sold. At the same time, my mother doesn’t have too much of a sweet tooth. Al makes sure to come over every year to get his fill. Last year, he dressed up in a Halloween costume in the middle of winter and when my mom answered the door, he said, “Trick or treat?”

He held out one of those stupid plastic pales of a jack-o-lantern.

“Well, Zoe had sold some of her candy bars but there were nineteen candy bars missing that she didn’t have the money for or even a record of selling. It happens every year: some kid tries to get away with eating a few extra. And part of the whole lesson we’re trying to teach with the fundraising, besides that you have to work for privileges like sports, is that we’re trying to instill honesty in them.”

“Didn’t you say that the candy doesn’t even make that much?”

“They don’t,” she said. “I think the profit we take from the fundraiser only covers a fourth of the funds we tell the kids. Anyways, I had to call Zoe’s mom and tell her about the missing candy bars. The woman kept trying to pay for them but I assured her it was fine, that she needed to know what was happening. The next day was the pizza party we were throwing for the kids for the fundraiser, but Zoe wasn’t at school. I figured her mom kept her home and punished her with missing the party.”

I dug in.

“Zoe came in the next day. She’s normally a chatterbox, but she was quiet that day. I chalked it up to her being upset about missing the pizza party. Then I was on lunch duty that day and I saw she was still quiet, staying away from the other girls she’s friends with. I went up to her to tell her it was okay. Tell her to use this as a learning experience, everybody makes mistakes. It was like she didn’t even hear what I was saying. So I grabbed her arm, not hard at all, to get her attention and she flinched. Zoe was holding her arm where I grabbed her. She was wearing long sleeves and I rolled them up and—”

My mom rubbed her forehead. She isn’t one for dramatics, either.

“It was all bruised up. I took her to the school nurse and we had the cops come. The counselor found out her mom had done it to Zoe for stealing. It was awful, Chance. All black and blue.”

“Did they arrest the mom?”

They had and while in handcuffs Zoe’s mom had declared she’s allowed to discipline her kid any way she sees fit.

“What’s going to happen to Zoe?”

“I don’t know. She’s staying with an uncle now. Don’t parents know where the line is? You can punish a child without abusing them. I’m telling you there should be a parenting license.”

So my mom has developed this theory about parental licensing in her years in the Cleveland Public School system. She figures you need a license to drive a car and to own a gun. Why? Because they can be potentially very dangerous things. But however much damage you can cause with a car or a gun, she argues that somebody can do a lot more damage if you’re a

bad parent. If you go on a shooting spree in a crowded mall, pretty soon the police are going to contain you and/or shoot your crazy ass. Same thing with high speed chases. We all know how these things end.

With a child though, there is a laundry list of bad things that can happen. What if serial killers got hugged more often? What if terrorists had spent more time with Mommy and Daddy at the dinner table? My mother still hasn't worked out all the kinks of implementing such a system. She thinks you probably have to make everybody sterile first and then only give the treatment when they pass the test, but getting billions of people to take the pill on time or having vasectomies would obviously pose a few obstacles.

"I'm going to have to testify at the trial next month," she said. "How's the sandwich?"

"Delicious per usual," I said. I finished the last bite. "Thank you."

"What do you have going on the rest of the day?"

"There's a PURE meeting at six. I don't know what after. You?"

"It's been a rough week. I think I'm going to stay in and relax. How's PURE been?"

"All right," I said. "The organization has put on events at every school in Northeast Ohio."

"That's something to be proud of," she said, sitting down at the kitchen table.

"It's a problem though. We're running out of elementary schools to go to. The principals are asking us to come back in a year or so."

"Let me know how that goes."

"I will."

My mom opened her mouth to say something and stopped herself. She put the frying pan in the sink before saying what was on her mind.

"Can I say something without you getting upset?"

These questions are always troublesome to me. I can guess at how I'm going to react to something but I have no idea what's about to be said so how can I know if I'm going to get upset? She could tell me I was a complete disappointment as a child. Not that my mom really would or did but if she did how was I suppose to react? I would probably get a little touchy if that were the case.

"I'll try not to," I said. "What is it?"

"I think you should get a part-time job."

This was not nearly as bad as it sounded. Yes, I admit I had been reluctant to get a job. I didn't spend too much money so that always worked in my favor for remaining unemployed. She had given me a car though and I had figured this day would come.

Clearly mom was taking my silence—I was thinking about how relieved I was that it wasn't something she'd found under my bed—for further resistance to the idea.

"I know you aren't the most expensive kid out there," she said, "but I could use a little help with the cell phone bill and car insurance. Plus, it'll be good preparation for college. You're ready to take on more responsibility."

I felt flattered by the way she put it. Violet was becoming busier and busier filling out scholarship applications. Al was in the middle of wrestling season. I didn't mind the idea of filling my time and wallet.

"Sure," I said. "I think Lydia is trying to find one too."

"You'll learn a lot from whatever you do. It'll help you manage time."

"Mom, you don't need to sell me on this."

"All right," she said. "All right."

“Thanks for the food but I’m going to go enjoy my unemployment while it lasts.”
I walked upstairs to take a nap. I heard my mother turn on *Judge Trudy* as I shut my door.

Zoe’s Mom and God: Cellmates?

Looking back on this now I realize that Zoe’s mom surely taught Zoe her lesson. It definitely taught her never to steal. It definitely corrected her delinquency.

And it was definitely child abuse.

No matter what she had done, Zoe’s mom was wrong to beat her daughter. Even to teach her not to steal. Even if that made her never ever have another thought about stealing again for the rest of her life.

And then I got to thinking about God. How every single thing that happens is supposed to be a part of his plan.

If he, she, or it is so good, then why would war and disease and all that bad stuff be a part of the plan?

I understand all the clichés: That you need to have some dark to contrast with the light. Without the bitter the sweet isn’t so sweet. That you have to be cruel to be kind and all that sort.

But aren’t things like Sudden Infant Death Syndrome and global war going a bit too far to prove a point?

I mean, I could appreciate being alive and healthy without having been forced to watch my grandmother forget my name. Without watching her die slowly but surely for 7 years while I was growing up.

What if God was like Zoe’s mom? Maybe he had good intentions to teach his children valuable lessons but went a little too far.

And by a little too far I mean...

- The more than 15 million people killed in World War I
- In 2005, one person died every 31 minutes from an alcohol related vehicle accident (or 16,885 people over the entire year in the United States).
- The 75 million who died from the Black Death suspected to be the Bubonic Plague.
- A study of child abuse in 2007 found that 896,000 American kids were abused. That would be about 2,450 children violated per day.
- During the Holocaust, over 5.7 million Jews were exterminated by German troops.
- The 2,500+ American babies who die of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome per year.
- 64,080 rapes occurred in the USA during 2005. That’s not even counting the suspected 59% of sexual assaults which go unreported.

If this was all done just to teach us a lesson, what’s the difference between what Zoe’s mom did to Zoe and what God does to us? I don’t mean to speak such blasphemy, but maybe Zoe’s mom and God made the same mistake.

Maybe they went too far to make their point.

PURE Poor Choice in Project Names

The PURE organization had called an emergency meeting so Violet and I had to postpone our makeup anniversary date.

Yes, yes: there was a makeup date for the makeup date.

I pulled up to Violet's house and knocked on the door. Violet's mother answered the door.

"Hello, Chance," she said. "Violet's still finishing up getting ready."

"No problem," I said. "How've you been?"

"Good, I've still got a laundry list of doctors' appointments but you know what I say to that. Oh well."

She grabbed an ashtray off the TV and lit a cigarette. We had sat down on opposite ends of the living room. Violet's mother was pretty friendly compared to the horror stories you hear about parents with shotguns running off their daughter's potential dates.

Violet's dad was easygoing too. He had been an avid corporation and globalization protestor. You didn't have to agree with him but you did have to actively avoid conversations that would go for at least an hour on the effect of globalization on indigenous peoples everywhere. He could go on and on about the presence of sweat shops.

Luckily, he was taking a nap and we could make it to the PURE meeting.

"Have you started looking into colleges, yet?"

"Yeah, I'm going on some visits with my friend, Al, in the next couple weeks."

She nodded approvingly and I continued.

"Case Western, Wright State, Cincinnati, Miami."

"Wonderful," she said. "I don't mean to dwell on any sadness but I am sorry to hear about your grandmother."

I would find these moments annoyingly frequent. I never did figure out a good reply to these statements.

Violet walked into the room and I completely forgot about this conversational awkwardness for the moment. She had on a dress skirt and an argyle sweater vest. Her eyes were dark and clear as always. I know it sounds oxymoronic but she had these deep brown eyes that made her look intelligent while also not having a care in the world. It was focus and, as I've said before, ridiculously sexy.

"Mom," she said, not so much bossy as pleading, "will you please stop smoking in the house?"

"I know," her mom said, putting out the cigarette. "I know you guys hate it. I don't mind smoking outside if it wasn't so damn cold."

Violet said, reluctantly, "I know."

This was the odd thing about their relationship. Violet seemed to accept the things her mother said in regards to smoking. Deep down, Violet didn't want to make her mother bundle up and go outside for a cigarette, which Violet's mom would do if Violet were stern enough. When it came to smoking, I couldn't wrap my mind around their relationship.

"Where are you two off to?" Violet's mom said.

"There's an emergency PURE conference."

"What's the occasion?"

"Unsure," Violet said.

I offered up another possibility.

"Margot's probably got another boring idea."

"Okay," Violet's mom, Daisy, said walking to the door with us. "You two be safe."

We got into the car and headed off to Violet's high school where the meeting was. Violet's mom came outside on the porch with a coat on and waved goodbye to us from the porch. As we were turning the corner, she lit another cigarette.

We hung out in the car a little bit.

"Sorry about having to cancel the date," Violet said.

"It's not your fault there was an emergency meeting," I said. "You look stunning."

"No, I don't."

"I beg to differ." I leaned in and kissed her. "So what do you think this is all about?"

"I'm guessing this is a reaction to the Breathe Easies."

"Oh, did they come out already?"

"Next week but there's always leaks in who wins beforehand."

"How'd we do?"

Her eyebrows raised the way they did when Lydia asked her if she'd participate in a striptease fitness class. "Bad."

We watched people filing in for a second before we headed in ourselves.

I might have given you a false impression about PURE. It was big in the area. The few people that were at the first meeting I went to were only a small fraction of the whole organization. It went city by city and this meeting was part of the Northeast Ohio faction. This was the original PURE chapter, Margot's pet project.

Violet and I kissed and split up at the auditorium entrance. She had a seat at the big kids table on stage with the rest of the board. I was a lowly member who had to sit in a crowd. I always respected that about Violet. She was always out there doing whatever it took. I was too shy to take on any leadership responsibilities within PUREI wanted to help but I also knew I was too much of a goof to be in a position of leadership.

Margot walked from the table to the podium. The voices of the auditorium quieted and then became silent when she adjusted the microphone.

"I'm glad all of you could make this meeting on such short notice. I know that a lot of you have dropped plans and traveled up to an hour to get here. Thank you for your continued loyalty to the cause." She paused and flipped the page on her notes. "I also know that a lot of you are wondering why I've called this emergency meeting. The Breathe Easies will be coming out in the near future and again the TRUTH organization has dominated the awards."

My apologies, I forgot to explain what the Breathe Easies are. The Breathe Easies are, as far as I know, the only awards given to anti-smoking organizations. They're judged by a group of editors from various college student newspapers. The categories are anywhere from flat out Most Impactful Anti-Smoking Organization to Best Marketing Campaign to Biggest Big Tobacco Nuisance.

They might not seem like much to you (I'll admit that I had never heard about them until before joining), but they are taken quite seriously with these types. The hope is that corporations will notice your organization via these awards. Corporate sponsorship money absolutely changes the nature and reach of your organization.

"Now, I've been working beside many of you for the past few years and I know how hard all of you have worked to make PURE what it is today. In no time, we have grown into the second largest anti-smoking organization in the nation behind TRUTH. It is rumored that we have won a few of the smaller awards but I believe this is only an attempt to appease us. To keep us quiet about the obvious bias going on with these so-called impartial Breathe Easy judges."

There were rumors of TRUTH members and the campus newspaper editors being in cahoots. Somebody in the TRUTH organization turned out to be a distant cousin of a Breathe Easy judge. At first, it seemed self-evident to me that TRUTH was cleaning up in the awards because they had such a sophisticated campaign, but I did have to admit it was a bit odd that they won Best New Campaign idea every year when they stuck to the same model of teenagers and in your face sarcasm.

“My first reaction was to expose this bias but I think we also need to look inwards at our operation. The PURE organization has done an excellent job of opening new chapters across the Midwest at a record speed.”

A large portion of Margot’s power was that she came from money—and communications money nonetheless. Her mother was a meteorologist for about a decade on a national morning news show who married a television network executive. Margot’s dad died and left boatloads of cash for Margot and her mother to live off of. She was not so much dedicated to the anti-smoking campaign as it was a platform to become the leader. She was simply able to use her mom’s connections in media to get out the organization’s word and pay for the startup kits used to implement new PURE chapters. Video meetings and PURE retreats weren’t cheap.

“That’s why I’ve decided to take PURE in a new direction.”

While there were many confused looks being exchanged in the audience, the lights in the auditorium dimmed and a projector displayed slides on the auditorium wall. The title of the first slide said, PURE: TOUCHING KIDS.

There were bullet points. The first said:

- **Elementary schools are so last year.**

Margot never seemed to get a hold on slang, though she was quite fond of using it in her presentations.

“We’ve solidified the message within our elementary schools. PURE cannot sit around for another two years to wait to get the message out there.”

- **What’s in? Preschools and Daycares.**

“Now, we will head to the pre-schools and the day cares to deliver our message.”

The next slide read with a subtitle of WHAT DO 5 YEAR OLDS LOVE?

Violet was sitting off to the right and behind Margot. Violet’s foot was tapping under the table anxiously, a subtle sign that I have learned to be the start of rage.

- **Balloon Animals, Clowns, Naps.**

“We’re going to run the same version of PURE school visits but adjust for the youngsters. Anti-smoking lullabies for naptime, balloon animals of clean pink lungs, and clowns, who doesn’t love clowns?”

I don't want to get into it right now, but I don't like clowns. Some crazy guy wearing makeup and enormously disproportioned feet whose idea of fun is cramming a car with fifty of his buddies? Not exactly my idea of a good time.

There was more of the same for the rest of Margot's lecture. At the end the lights in the auditorium came on, Margot bowed at the sparse clapping from the crowd.

This was not good.

Desperate Searches

I sat down at the computer and started my search for Charlie. I searched through the Kent State alumni database but couldn't find much more beside his graduation date. This would become a common story for the various routes I took.

The search went through Canadian phone directories. In greater Montreal, there were 35 Laplaces. There were no Charlie Laplaces or C. Laplaces.

I thought about how little I knew of my father. This went on for a couple weeks whenever I had wasted a couple hours searching through Canadian newspaper archives or medical records. Construction companies I checked with had no record of him. I even checked with a few travel agencies to look into recent tourists of Hawaii. No luck, though.

He had left here. But for where?

There was a wife and daughter to look for too, but they were nameless. It was possible that neither of them had the last name of Laplace. A wife keeping her maiden name. A daughter taking a new husband's name.

A needle in a haystack? Yes, but the haystack was located in another country and hidden over 17 years ago.

A Family Reunited

On the day of Marlene's funeral, I fantasized about what my father was up to. Charlie coming home from a day of golf, a good day on the course, winning some money off his country club buddies.

I could see him going home to his wife of twenty plus years, Natalie. She is a faithful, dutiful spouse to Charlie. Until five years ago, she has been a stay-at-home mom. She's the owner of a local flower shop. It's a shop that doesn't make too much of a profit. It barely broke even last year with the poor economy.

Natalie doesn't stress herself out about making a profit though. You see, Charlie's a successful physics consultant for a major Canadian construction agency. He had made important contacts with the Canadian government through the same program that had allowed him to go to Kent State the first place. Because of the poor state of Canadian collegiate physics departments, Charlie's American education was valued in the country.

So Flower Power Boutique is less a business in the traditional sense of the word and more of a grand-scale hobby of Natalie's. It gets this empty-nester, her only daughter in her freshman year of college, out of the house.

Charlie is a man who enjoys letting his wife splurge.

"Whatever makes her happy" is a phrase Charlie utters often to himself and to whomever happens to be around. He's made a fine living for himself. He feels he has another ten or so years

of work in him. Important work: skyscrapers to build, national monuments to renovate. He knows this passion for his work causes his wife to need something to do for the time between their daughter, Gabby, going off to college and his own retirement.

As I've already stated, my mother is Robin so Natalie is not my mother. Does this make Charlie's wife, Natalie, my stepmother? I think a stepmom probably needs to marry the father after I'm born, not before. If you haven't already figured it out, I'm a child out of wedlock.

Charlie went home the day of my grandmother's funeral and greeted his wife.

Natalie told him about her day. She told him about the new shipment of tulips at the store and how she couldn't stop thinking about the trip they were about to take.

"All that dieting is going to pay off once we hit those beaches," she said, placing her hands on her hips to mimic a runway model. Natalie had lost 12 pounds in the past month.

Charlie couldn't tell the difference but he'd learn that a happy wife made a happy marriage.

"It certainly has," he said, winking at her.

"What time is Gabby getting in?"

"I think her flight lands at 5," Charlie said, talking off his golf spikes. "I was thinking we'd take her out for a nice meal. She's probably sick of the college dining hall meals."

"Oh, she'll love that," Natalie said. Now standing perpendicular to the hallway mirror and examining her stomach. "I can't wait to hear all about her semester. You think she's met any boys?"

"I sure hope not."

When the time came, they loaded into the car and went to the Montreal airport. Gabby's plane was about to arrive.

It was Gabby's first time home since leaving for college. She had gone on a trip to Europe for the holiday break, which about broke Natalie's heart.

Gabby was coming home this weekend, because her parents were about to have their 25th wedding anniversary the next day. The Laplaces had decided to renew their vows and take a trip to Hawaii or "Anywhere but Canada," as Natalie put it to the travel agent.

The doting parents met their daughter in baggage claim. They hugged, watched numerous bags go around a conveyor belt before spotting Gabby's, and got back to the car.

Natalie began pelting her daughter with a barrage of questions.

"How are classes?"

"Was your flight long?"

"What's the weather like there?"

"Any boys you should be telling us about?"

Charlie shielded his daughter from the full inquisition by rubbing his wife knee and saying, "Anybody hungry?"

Through the rear view mirror Charlie saw Gabby nod. He pulled into the parking lot of a nice Italian restaurant which he remembers as Gabby's favorite. Charlie has taken his daughter here over the years for birthdays, graduations, and any other events that require a little chicken parmesan to celebrate.

"I missed this place."

Natalie is a mixture of happiness and distinctly maternal nervousness. Charlie is also extremely happy to have Gabby home. They both live busy lives in different cities. He knows during the school year these good times are few and far between.

Why Kent?

Charlie was in the middle of lasagna. He was impressed at how much information Natalie had extracted about Gabby's past months at school over breaded mushrooms and salad. He lightly entertained the thought of Natalie being a secret agent.

Natalie and Charlie had met in high school. The two got engaged shortly after their graduation. Natalie had gotten pregnant over the summer. She decided not to go to college because of these events and although she felt she was always destined for motherhood and happy for the blessing of a baby girl, Natalie did have regrets about not being able to attend college.

This is what has caused Natalie's borderline intrusive interest in her daughter's life. She tried to capture the feeling of college life with its midterms, coffee addicts, frat parties, activists, philosophy majors, and other stereotypical experiences she felt she'd miss out on through Gabby.

And after giving her most parent friendly version of her college exploits, Gabby had (temporarily) given Natalie back her missed youth.

Now, the daughter began to ask questions.

"What were your college days like, dad?"

Charlie stopped a fork that was making a beeline for his mouth. "What would like to know exactly?"

"I mean I know you went to Kent State. But why did you go to Kent? Did you have a lot of scholarships? Join a frat? Why'd you go into physics?"

"Let's see," Charlie said. "I was an average student in high school. I didn't really get any scholarships. Your grandfather was all about a man making his own way in the world. He wouldn't help me pay for anything and that that was the most valuable lesson he could ever give me."

"Grandpa Laplace is tough."

"Yes, he is. He thought he had made a good life for himself without the expensive college degree and didn't think there was any reason I couldn't do the same. So I had to put off college for a couple years."

"What'd you do?" Gabby said.

"He worked," Natalie said. "We were getting hitched then."

The waiter filled Charlie's water. Which was strange because he'd only taken a sip since they'd sat down.

"Grandpa Laplace got me a job on his construction crew, but I knew I didn't want to be doing manual labor for forty years like he did. I landed an internship with the engineers for the construction company. I had always wanted to create things."

"He wanted to design spaceships when he was younger."

Gabby had not known this fact. She thought about her father watching a rocket launch and talking to his colleagues about some detail about the rocket.

"But by the time I would have got there, NASA and everybody was done with real exploration. I still was interested in physics and that spark got rekindled at that internship. The work came very natural to me and the guys I was working under taught me a lot. Then, there was the huge Engineers strike of 1987. Nothing got built that year. Tons of projects stopped dead in the middle of construction."

Charlie took a sip of his water. The overeager waiter came flying around the corner to top off the glass.

"Eager beaver," Natalie said.

"Must be his first day on the job," Charlie said and continued his story. "I won't bore you with all the details but a third of the engineers in Canada left their jobs, including some of the guys I interned for. It was a mess. The government responded by creating Bring Back the Knowledge program. Highly publicized."

"You guys need any more water?" said the waiter said.

All three of their glasses were filled to the brim.

"No thank you," Charlie said politely, then turning back to Gabby. "It was my ticket out of construction. The government put aside money to send Canadian kids to go study the sciences at any American state college for free. Tuition, room and board, books, everything was included. The only stipulation of Bring Back the Knowledge program was that after the students got their degrees they had to come back to Canada and work in their field for at least five years. It wasn't a magic wand fix, but I could have cared less."

"I was so happy," Natalie said. "I had been praying that Charlie would find some way to get to college and this was it. God really answered my prayers."

"So I picked Kent and got my start. Your mother and I knew it would be hard but this was a huge break."

"I came out to Kent one summer with you," Natalie said to Gabby.

"I was in Kent?" Gabby said.

"Technically," Charlie said, "You were still in your mother's belly."

"I moved in with Grandpa and Grandma Benson," Natalie said. "Your father went off to Ohio. I was at the end of my first trimester when he left."

"Your first birthday was over my spring break," Charlie said. "I was planning to be home to welcome you into the world. At Kent, I had gotten a job at the student center to make a little money to send home. My boss was a real tool, though. He wouldn't give me the week off to come back."

"It was horrible," Natalie said. "Not your birth. I was so happy about you, Gabby, but I knew how badly your father wanted to be there."

Charlie said, "Biggest regret of my life: not coming home that break."

"It's okay, Dad," Gabby said. She grabbed Charlie's hand. "So how was college when you got there? Was it a breeze for my genius father?"

"Far from it," Charlie said. "I did okay, though."

The waiter passed the table. He looked at their glasses intently like a security guard in the mall watching rowdy teenagers.

"He's being modest," Natalie said. "Top 5% of his class."

"Really?" Gabby said.

"Yes, but I still had those damn general requirements. They were all hard for me. I was always screwing up some accounting final or struggling through some difficult Modernist poetry."

"Top 5% isn't bad though," Gabby said.

"You guys need any more water?" the waiter said.

The three glasses had been untouched since the last refill.

"We're good, thanks," Charlie said politely.

As the waiter walked away, Gabby gave her father a mischievous glance that he recognized. Charlie nodded, serious as a child who has accepted a double dog dare.

"One, two," Gabby said.

"I can't take you guys anywhere," Natalie said with a light heart.

"Three," Charlie said.

They chugged the water like Lydia had done with whiskey after Al dumped her. The waiter came barreling across the room, almost knocking over an elderly woman on her way to the bathroom. He tripped a yard or two in front of their table. The Laplaces tried to restrain their laughter as ice and water spilled out from the dropped pitcher. They were unsuccessful though, and Charlie tried to make up for their teasing with a healthy tip.

Two Sets of Vows

After the fine Italian food, the reunited Laplaces went home. Natalie and Gabby talked about the itinerary for the twenty-fifth anniversary day. Natalie spoke of the relatives and old friends who would be there. Charlie happily thought her smile might be permanent.

When they got home, Charlie let the two ladies catch up and retired to his study.

Natalie figured her husband was tired but Charlie had tomorrow on his mind. He was thinking about the vow renewals.

What was he going to say? Would it sound sincere?

He was deathly worried. Those who fear being exposed often do.

Charlie is not an eloquent speaker. His strength lies in numbers and the rules of mathematics, not words. He searched online, typing in: Vow Renewal Ceremony. After dismissing some of the initial entries, those Charlie considered to spiritual or tree hugger-ish. Any of the vows that mentioned something along the lines of being in tune with nature were instantly throw out.

Finally, Charlie found a standard, traditional set of vows to use.

Sample Vows for a Vow Renewal Ceremony. It was a straight-forward title which Charlie appreciated. He took a pen and paper. As he began them off, Charlie paused and stared at the screen.

There were two sets of vows and Charlie didn't know which one to print out. He stared at the screen for a long time before he chose the first set. He wrote it down, folded up the paper and placed it in his wallet. He shut off the light and went upstairs to bed, careful not to wake Natalie. He whispered that he loved her, but she was asleep. It didn't matter to him though, she looked lovely.

Charlie opened his the next morning to Gabby pushing gently at his arm.

"Mom wanted me to make sure you were awake."

The moment reminded him of other times he had woken up to a little girl. A little girl with a little ponytail that begged and pleaded for him to make chocolate chip pancakes.

Where had that little girl gone?

"I'm up." He sat up and rubbed his eyes. "I'll jump in the shower now. Where is Mom?"

"Getting ready in the downstairs bathroom."

He wondered how long she had looked more like a woman than a girl. Charlie was thankful that she hadn't received the oversized ear of him and the Laplace family. It seemed like he had just fallen asleep. It seemed like he had just brought a beautiful baby girl home from the hospital, not some university.

How many days had he forgotten in between?

“I need to finish getting ready,” Gabby said. “The limo is going to be here in an hour.”

She gave her father a kiss on the cheek. Charlie watched her leave the room. Instead of getting in the shower, he opened up his laptop on the nightstand. He looked up the website from the previous night and copied down the second set of vows.

He put these in his jacket pocket.

Charlie felt relieved after this. He went to get ready.

Before God

The renewal vows ceremony started at 11 o’clock at the Saint-Eustache Church, a church in the North Shore section of Montreal. The French Canadian priest, Pierre Jacques, who had married Natalie and Charlie in this same exact church a quarter of a century ago, was here again.

Jacques began the ceremony. His hair was steel gray now. It had been dark brown at the original wedding when he was an inexperienced kid, fresh out of Bible school and nervous about his first wedding.

But now, Pierre Jacques was a veteran of ministry, well known in the Greater Toronto region for his sermons. He was considered a good luck charm to couples. Only eleven out of the 621 couples he had married were divorced. Actually, four of them were still in the process of separation and, of those four, two were considering reconciliation and were in marriage counseling.

The marriage counseling was being conducted by—who else?—the lucky French priest himself. He had a reputation to uphold, so these counseling sessions were of the utmost importance in his eyes.

The harder of the two cases were the Rubens. Pierre Jacques knew in his heart that Mr. Ruben would never cease to be a womanizer, but Jacques gave Mrs. Ruben the hope she needed that her husband would change.

There was no hope of the Mendelsons ever having a happy marriage. However, Jacques was less worried about them divorcing. It was obvious that either would be willing to give up their mutually purchased yachts and vacations houses.

Regardless, the priest attempted to console the couple vigorously. These were potential blemishes on his record.

Other notable qualities of Jacques included his ability to cite Bible verses with ease in French and English. He was taking evening classes in Mandarin Chinese. Jacques had begun translating verses from the Old Testament. Pierre Jacques was also known for his ability to adlib his sermons and wedding ceremonies without taking away from the importance of the occasions.

The organ stopped playing and Pierre began.

Family, friend, loved ones, and wedding crashers here for the buffet...

Laughter came from the pews.

We are gathered here today to witness Charlie Laplace and Natalie Benson renew their promises of commitment to each other after twenty-five blissful years of marriage. I’m happy to see many of the same faces who were here on that fateful day.

Although, some of you do look a bit different myself included. Some of you might remember there being another priest, some good looking young man with thick dark brown hair. Well, don't be fooled. It's the same guy.

And I'm glad to see a face that wasn't here 25 years ago: Gabby, the product of this holy union, who is in her freshman year of college.

Gabby smiled at this. So did everyone else.

I am happy to announce to everyone that besides raising a wonderful daughter since the last time we all were here in Saint-Eustache Church, Charlie and Natalie have succeeded in keeping those promises they made to each other and to God twenty-five years ago.

He didn't show any outwards sign of it, but Charlie was nervous about Pierre's last statement. Charlie's thoughts swirled about Kent State, Robin, Natalie, and the second of vows he had copied down that were in his jacket pocket.

And now today the couple has come back to this beautiful church to renew their vows before family, precious friends, and perhaps, most important, before God. I'm going to let Charlie start off.

All eyes were on Charlie and he knew it. He had a decision to make: which vows to use.

The first set that he'd printed out last night in his wallet, or the ones he copied down on second thought that morning. He was annoyed. Was really necessary for Jacques to emphasize *Before God*?

Charlie hesitated for a moment that seemed to everybody else in the church to be simple nerves.

Forcing a smile, he reached for his wallet.

Charlie's Renewal Vows

Charlie began his renewal vows. The ones he copied from an article titled, "Sample Vows for a Vow Renewal Ceremony" by Nina Callaway. Under the section named "Renewing Your Wedding Vows for an Anniversary," he read:

Natalie, 25 years ago, I pledged
(noun; spouse's name) (number)

my love and commitment to you, but it seems like only yesterday. I promised to love you, honor you, comfort and keep you. I pledged to be by your side in sickness and in health, in times of want, and times of plenty, for better or worse, for the rest of our lives. We have had all of those things, and you have been by my side as we created a family, a home, and a life together.

Today, the beginning of our 25th year as husband and wife,
(number)

in the presence of God, and our family and friends, I renew my vows to you, pledging my eternal love for you, and eagerly awaiting what life may bring us.

Natalie cried and Gabby smiled. They both felt blessed to have such a husband, such a father.

The crowd aww-ed and eww-ed, just like they do on Maury when a “good guy” comes in. People whispered how sweet he was. Wives in the room secretly fell in love with Charlie and wondered if their husbands felt that way about them. Husbands secretly hated Charlie knowing full well what the distant look in their wives eyes meant.

None of them knew Nina Callaway had had a hand in this too.

What a charmer my father is.

A Real Life Fairy Tale

It was time for the bride’s portion of the show. Natalie began her vows after her bridesmaid helped wipe the mascara running down her cheeks.

For the occasion, she had written her own vows. Natalie did not plug words into prefabricated speeches as Father Larry, Pierre Jacque, or her husband Charlie all had.

The bride recited her written word:

Charlie, this might sound crazy but from the moment I first saw you I knew that I loved you. I remember the exact moment. It was at your first varsity football game, my first high school game of cheerleading. When I came home after, I told my mom, God rest her soul, that I had fallen in love.

And she was concerned as any mother should be when her daughter starts saying such things.

First, my mother said, “This isn’t the first time a pretty cheerleader has fallen in love with the quarterback.” She shook her head. “Ah, to be young again.”

I went on and on, declaring how real my feelings for you were.

And Mom said, “I know you aren’t lying about how you feel but trust me, this is not the first or the last time this will happen. I don’t want to burst your bubble, dear, but you can’t expect anything real to come of this. It’s an infatuation honey.”

She wasn’t trying to be mean. She even joked around to try and make me feel better.

She said, “At least you’re smarter than I was. At least you’re falling for the star quarterback, I married the water boy.”

There was laughter at this. Natalie’s father Liam was notably clumsy and been the high school’s water boy. Liam laughed with tears in his eyes. He was not hurt by this joke. The tears came because Natalie’s words reminded him so much of his late wife.

Just as Charlie had wondered where his little girl had gone that morning, Liam wondered where his wife had gone.

I suppose God only knows.

My friends and family told me we were too young. They told me that I was too young to marry, too young to know what love is, and above all else, too young to make a marriage work.

I am happy to stand before my friends...

Natalie turned to her maid of honor and bridesmaids.

Katie, Kristin, Lauren, and Jessica. And I'm happy to be with my ever supportive family.

Natalie turned to the family sitting in the front pews. This seating location was a good thing for such a day. The front pews are a bad place to be sitting during funerals and a good place to be during weddings.

So the Bensons were happy to see their Natalie, still such a happy wife.

And I'm happy to report that all these caring people in my life were wonderfully wrong.

Another set of laughter came from the pews. Natalie turned back towards Charlie.

I prayed to God the night before our wedding that I wasn't making a mistake. I asked Him for confidence in you, in me, and most of all, in us.

He gave it to me, too.

This might sound crazy, some teenage girl with a bad case of puppy love, but from the first moment I saw you, I knew we were meant to be. Heaven had conspired to place us there in that run down high school football stadium.

We made it Charlie. Twenty five years. We made it.

Maybe I'm just stubborn...

There were some sideways glances between bridesmaids at this statement. All made in lighthearted fun though.

I wanted to prove them all wrong. Through all the doubts and against all the odds, we made it.

From the moment we said, "I do," all those years ago, I knew I would have the happiest marriage I could have ever asked God for.

I know it sounds absolutely insane but from the moment I was born, I know now that I was meant to be your wife.

Natalie had never felt more sure about anything.

I keep asking God, "What did I do to deserve such a husband?"

I love you so much, Charlie. I always have and I always will. I know it sounds horrible but for twenty five years I've been waiting to find that flaw in you, for the passion of our love to die down, for us to get used to each other.

None of that ever happened, though. I've been thinking about it and I think I have it figured out:

Charlie, we're the fairy tale that came true.

Pierre then concluded the ceremony.

With the power vested in me by the province of Quebec, I now pronounce you man and wife... again.

To overwhelming applause, Charlie and Natalie kissed.

Prince Charming had a name that day. Charlie. He had the heart of every woman in Saint-Eustache Church swooning as he kissed his bride. The wedding attendees would recall Natalie as the most beautiful bride, complete with running mascara, they had ever seen.

Not one person in the Montreal church that morning felt they would ever be able to realistically attain the happiness of this marriage before them. In their hearts and minds, they all felt inferior to Charlie and Natalie:

The fairy tale that came true.

What Charlie Should Have Said

Charlie remembered when he and Natalie had first taken vows to be faithful to each other as man and wife. He knew his wife had kept her promise to him.

He also knew there was a woman named Robin and a boy named Chance out there. That the boy was his.

While Charlie was kissing his beautiful bride for the second time, twenty five years later, he wasn't thinking of his wife or Pierre or the familiar faces in the pews. He was thinking about the piece of paper in his jacket pocket.

The vows he should have read.

At the end of the ceremony, there was an extravagant wedding reception. It was a party full of flowing champagne and a who's who of Canadian construction. The event was too wonderful for your esteemed host, Chance, to accurately describe. My command of the language couldn't do the reception justice.

I'm far too *limited* to give you an accurate account of the good times that were had.

I can say, however, that my father got considerably drunk during the celebration. Don't worry, he had already hired a driver to take Natalie and himself to the airport. Charlie had even been hired two small crews of pilots to fly the fairy tale couple to Honolulu, Hawaii. He hired two so when the first crew got tired, they could get switch places with the second crew in Los Angeles, California, who would finish the trip to Hawaii.

The inebriated groom had left the reception hall with his bride. Rushing through the shower of uncooked rice, Charlie reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out that second copy of vows and with one fluid motion he crumpled the vows up and threw them in a sewer drain.

He did this undetected.

On the paper, floating among the excrement and other gross whatnots that greater Montreal citizens had flushed down their toilets, was what Charlie should have said:

On our wedding day, I pledged many things to you, including my faithfulness. With great sorrow and regret, I acknowledge that I broke that vow, but I realize now the enormity of my mistake. Others come and go, but you are the constant in my life with whom I will always love. I believe in this marriage more than ever, and I reaffirm my love and commitment to you.

On our wedding day, I pledged to love you in sickness and in health, and for better or worse. The past years have tested those vows, but our enduring love for each other has prevailed. I come here today to make a fresh start, to renew our vows of love, honor, and fidelity, and to reaffirm my love for you.

25 years ago, I promised to love you for as long as we
(number)

both should live. I never imagined that I would face losing you so soon, or the depths of despair I would feel at that prospect. Today, we are on the other side of the mountain, and I am so ecstatic that I get to continue life's journey by your side. Once again, I promised to love you, honor you and keep you, for better or worse, in sickness and in health, for as long as we both shall live.

This was also from Nina Callaway's "Sample Vows for a Vow Renewal Ceremony" and under the section subtitled, "Renewing Your Wedding Vows After an Infidelity, Illness, or other Stressful Time."

As Mister Laplace rode in the freshly washed limousine with his wife, the one he'd betrayed, he sat in his brand new tuxedo and polished leather wingtips, remembering all the deceitful things he'd done while the wedding vows Charlie should have used to finally come clean were floating in a sea of filth through the greater Montreal sewers.

Who Exactly Are These People Who Are Shitting On Fans?

There was some time to kill on the Laplaces' flight to California and then Hawaii. Through check in and customs and boarding, Charlie was not noticeably drunk. My father holds his booze as well as the best of them.

Natalie, a perpetual worrier with a myriad of nervous habits, shuttled them from place to place, told Charlie when to take off his shoes before the metal detector and what gate they needed to find.

He wanted to do exactly this for the rest of his life.

Every particle in his body wanted to listen to whatever Natalie asked him to do and just do it. No more problems to face that needed heavy introspection. There had been plenty of moments he felt it necessary to tell Natalie what happened in the past years. Many silences in conversations seemed tailor made for the confession, countless vulnerable moments where if she would have just asked, he'd have been able to tell her about the whole thing without hesitation.

She never did though.

He thought about this as they checked their luggage. Charlie didn't even notice the plane take off.

"A little bumpy," Natalie said. "Don't you think?"

"Uhhh," Charlie said, grasping what she was referring to. "Yeah. Very bumpy."

He had thought about this often: a few years in another country and not even a hint or subconscious implication that infidelity could have occurred. Was it ignorance or loyalty?

Most times, he couldn't make out the difference between the two.

Natalie, on the other hand, didn't notice Charlie's quiet demeanor. She had gone from worrying about the tickets and if her luggage would exceed the weight limit and Gabby's trip back and all the other things there were to keep a mother wide awake at night. Finally, she felt relief as they fastened their safety belts and listened to the flight attendant point out where the emergency exits were.

As the airplane leveled out after takeoff, Natalie took out a novel. She reads quite a bit, mostly romance novels with many pages and little substance. The books are often, by any impartial judge, the equivalent of soft-core pornography marketed to housewives with covers depicting a guy usually with long blond hair and wearing baggy white dress shirts opened up to reveal a muscular chest. Also on these book covers, there was almost always a damsel in distress with a very colorful dress, with her head back across the beefcake's forearm.

Somewhere over Colorado, Natalie was 218 pages into *Devilsh Hearts and Untamed Desires*. The male protagonist of the book was riding on horseback in the rain on his way to confront a lost lover's husband on a Virginian farm. What the male protagonist with buns of steel did not know was that while his undying love was mutual, she had lost hope and was about to have give in to her husband's sexual advances for the first time in two years. The story's hero was about to break through the front door with his incredible forearms.

In other words, the shit was about to hit the fan.

Natalie was always grateful about the good that had happened in her life which she believed largely was due to God. However, she fought with a nagging

feeling of wishing things were more exciting. Nothing in real life had been like the stories she read in her romance novels in such a long time.

Charlie tried to concentrate on the in-flight movie but no avail. The intoxicated feeling soon turned into tiredness. All the moments when he wished he'd told Natalie the truth. More and more, Charlie thought of how it was possible the infidelity and the child would have been a distant thing of the past they had gotten over if Charlie had told Natalie years ago.

For him, the shit always seemed to be on the verge of hitting the fan, but never quite there.

"How's my husband?" Natalie said.

"Fine," he said. "How's my wife?"

"Fine, too."

They kissed each other.

"You look tired," Natalie said. "Get some sleep."

Charlie took the blanket Natalie grabbed from the overhead compartment. He wondered about the expression itself. Of course, it's clear that it would be bad if shit hit the fan, but who exactly was producing the shit and why did they do it over a fan?

He dozed off before figuring this out.

During a short layover in LAX, the couple grabbed drinks from a bar.

"That was really wonderful," Natalie said.

"It was," Charlie said, sipping on his whiskey. "Happy twenty-fifth, Mrs. Laplace."

He extended his glass towards her. She clinked her martini against his.

"The same to you, Mr. Laplace," Natalie said. They both took a sip and she checked her watch. "Do you think Gabby will be up?"

"What time is it?"

"It's seven thirty in Montreal."

"You realize our child is a college freshman. She'll probably be waking up when we touchdown in Honolulu."

"Good point."

There was a pause. Another opportunity to come clean, but Charlie didn't feel anxious. The choice in vows he made at the pews was the now-or-never moment and he had shown his true colors to, well, himself. For him, the shit would never hit the fan.

Charlie, sobered up and surprisingly not too tired, soon found himself again being directed by Natalie. This could be easy he thought. Let everything just happen and not worry so much about the moral implications or the reasons or anything except how to fulfill the gentle requests she asked of him.

They both slept the entire Pacific portion of the flight. They landed, had leis placed around their necks as they got off the plane to the sounds of live ukuleles, and headed to the hotel. On the first day, they spent most of the day at the beach and the night in the outdoor bar sipping frozen alcoholic beverages. The more Charlie let everything happen, the easy it all seemed.

Natalie and Charlie went to bed relatively early. Their internal clocks were still off. Natalie passed out without any trouble but Charlie struggled to sleep.

After about forty-five minutes of tossing and turning, Charlie set out for a walk on the beach. Once he realized there was an entire ocean shoreline to pass the wee hours gazing at, he wasn't upset about the insomnia.

Charlie made it to the shoreline, the tides bathing his bare feet, and thought of his daughter. He knew there was a good chance she was having a party at their vacant house with high school friends who might happen to be in town and others who never left. Maybe she had a boy over. Someone she'd never say a word about to Charlie and Natalie. He hoped she was doing something like that—taking some risk, making some memory.

It made him feel a little better when he thought about his daughter doing things she ought not to. At times, she seemed too perfect to be his: straight A student who was pretty and funny and had absolutely everything to look forward to in this world. She deserved a little mischief.

The moon lay before him and its light bounced off the breaking waves like rocks skipped by some carefree kid. He had a more than any dad could ask for, and a wife who couldn't even imagine any wrong in her husband.

This very moment, the one where Charlie wanders out onto some Hawaiian beach in the middle of the night was the same exact moment I was back in Ohio after the cancelled Azimuth Dream show, sitting outside. My father and I were watching the moon.

Together and separately.

On that shore, Charlie glanced at the lunar surface, lit a cigarette, and thought aloud, "This is the life."

(New Chapter)

Margot had already set up times and locations to implement her *Touching Kids* program, what she saw as the next phase of PURE.

As a result, Violet and I found ourselves pushing our makeup anniversary date further back. The day after the emergency meeting, we headed to a preschool in Mayfield with a few other members in tow.

It was clear that nobody was particularly thrilled about Margot's new idea. However, she was the boss and we were working to combat smoking. The six of us crammed into the stupid little extension van PURE had borrowed from a local church. The mood was quiet and nobody spoke of *Touching Kids*.

When we made it to the preschool, the kids were in the middle of juice box time. I did not initially realize the significance of this fact.

The thing that really sticks out in my mind was the unpleasant feeling of sticky hands.

There weren't many kids. This was the first of two shifts we were going to do for each crowd, the AM and the PM classes. We had more adjustments to make than I had anticipated. At first, we each paired up—I was, of course, with Violet—and then each pair picked a group of kids to have for the day. Since this program was new to all of us, somebody soon brought it to our attention that only some of us would be able to perform some of the activities Margot had prepared for us in a nice, tidy packet.

On other days, particularly those with more kids to convert, the only option would be to split the groups up. (This was the preferred methodology, too. It was believed that children responded better to our message if they were able to associate the PURE programs to a face. Most kids feel most comfortable opening up to one or two people for an extended amount of time rather than, say, eight different people in a short amount of time.) However that day we had the luxury of keeping the entire 34 children together. This also allowed for us lowly PURE members how to perform the activities.

Before she walked up in front of the classroom, Violet whispered to me, “Let’s put some lipstick on this pig.”

Violet started off the day as she was the highest ranking PURE in attendance—and in my opinion, hands down the best looking. She was wearing jeans and a PURE t-shirt that was a size too big for her but I’m telling you a burlap sack would look great on.

“Hello everybody. Today, we’re going to have some fun and learn about why smoking is bad. Who wants to have fun?”

It always surprised me how enthusiastically kids responded to this question. It was as if we’d actually stop them from having fun if they didn’t scream at the top of their lungs, a miniature version of what goes on at the New York Stock Exchange floor.

“Sounds like you guys want to have fun,” Violet said, the consummate professional.

“Billy, here, is going to start us off with our first activity.”

Billy was nice enough—definitely on the quiet side but never caused any trouble either.

“Anybody think balloons are fun?” he said.

Enthusiastic hands shot up.

“All right, that’s what I like to see. I think balloons are awesome.”

Something about the way he said it made me think he wasn’t kidding. A lack of social interaction seemed to be the cause. This made Billy good for PURE’s agenda, targeting kids. Things like balloons and cartoons and other things kids like, Billy still liked too.

“My mother’s in the circus,” Billy said. [Dear reader, feel free to insert your own joke about bearded ladies here.] “Do any of you like the circus?”

“I do, I do,” said the crowd, the sugar from their juice boxes kicking in.

I wanted to say, “I don’t, I don’t.”

To be honest, the whole concept is bizarre. You take these kids to this place where everything smells faintly like manure no matter where you’re at. Then, you go and ride on these portable roller coasters that probably haven’t been inspected for safety in a decade. After that, the little ones are taken to watch people shot out of canons and individuals whose professional description is “sword swallower.” I’m sure nobody ever went home and tried that.

The circus is the original extreme stunt/daredevil venue, but without the DON’T TRY THIS AT HOME disclaimer.

A wholesome event that you and your family can enjoy when the traveling band of convicted felons and strung out drug addicts stop in your town.

“But every year when the circus comes into town, she teaches me a new trick with balloons.”

Billy began to pass out pink balloons to the kids. They were sitting cross-legged on a large area rug, but a few were lucky enough to have snagged seats on bean bag chairs.

“In order for me to be able to show you guys the newest trick, I need your help in blowing up the balloons.”

The all dutiful worked at the task set before them. Billy continued the lesson.

“You guys are doing a great job.” There was the occasional half inflated balloon that got away from somebody and wildly zigzagged across the room. “I had a bunch of kids my age who smoke try to do this and they all got too tired to fill up their balloons. The cigarettes made their lungs too weak to blow up balloons. They’re all sad because they can’t do the balloon tricks my mom teaches me.”

While our group was exceptional in blowing up the balloons, Billy had not anticipated the lack of coordination five year olds have. The kids struggled enormously with tying up the balloons. More awkward noises and randomly flying objects followed.

The other five members of PURE stepped in to help them out. We ran into the occasional and unfortunate balloon end that had an extra bit of slobber waiting for us. Many of rubber balloons were sticky from the juice boxed hands.

The balloons Billy had passed out were the kind used for balloon animals, long and skinny.

“My mother came home and told me about the Fire Breathers. Have any of you guys seen the fire breathers?”

The hands all went up. Another safe activity for your kids to pick up at the circus.

“Now, I used to think the Fire Breathers had to be damaging their lungs,” Billy said. “My mom found out they don’t hurt their lungs at all. Does anybody know how they breathe fire?”

A blonde boy with a bowl cut stood up without hesitation. “They hold the gasoline in their mouths and the flame in front of their mouths. Then, they spit the gas forward.”

“Right,” Billy said. “They breathe the fire out. The gas stays in their mouth and not their lungs, so their lungs aren’t harmed.”

It didn’t seem best to spread that idea amongst preschoolers, but I bit my tongue, hoping none of them had ready access to gasoline.

“Where do you think he’s going with this?” I asked Violet.

“No clue,” she said. “How you doing with the circus talk? Going to have nightmares about clowns, tonight?”

“Very funny.”

“Remember, they breathe the fire out. So their lungs aren’t harmed.”

Billy took one of the balloons from the group. He made a few fast twists and boom: there was a pink lung. He held it up.

“This is what a healthy lung looks like, nice and pink. This is what the Fire Breathers’ healthy lungs look like because they breathe the fire out. Here, now I’ll show you guys how to do it. There are five twists.”

After teaching the kids how to do the balloon trick, Billy dug through the cardboard box behind him and pulled out another bag of balloons. This time, some were gray and some black.

“Same routine,” he said, passing them out.

Again, they blew up the balloons and we tied up the disturbingly moist and sticky balloons.

“My mother also told me about the guy who operates the Ferris wheel. He gets bored sometimes because he never gets to go on the ride, he’s only allowed to push the buttons and help people in and out of the carts. Doesn’t seem like a dangerous job at all?”

The kids shook their head. One even yawned. Boring.

“So the guy who operates the Ferris wheel picked up smoking to pass the time. Remember how the Fire Breathers breathe the fire out? Think about it this way, the Ferris wheel guy breathes the fire in so his lungs get all smoky and charred up.”

Billy took another volunteered balloon from the audience.

“And my mom said the poor guy who works the Ferris wheel lungs are damaged so bad that he can’t even blow up a balloon like you guys can. And none you guys have been smoking cigarettes?”

A resounding “NO.” Besides not being able to buy cigarettes, I had an image of them all struggling with the lighter itself.

Billy smiled, did the same twists he had just taught the kids and held up a gray lung. I think he purposely picked an underinflated balloon because this one looked extra droopy and sad.

“This is what the Ferris wheel guy’s lungs look like. Gross, huh?”

They nodded in agreement.

“It’s your guys turn now.”

They went to work and Billy went through to help the ones who were struggling.

After the balloon portion, we had the kids watch a puppet show. Then, we got the kids ready for their nap.

It didn’t feel right though.

You see with the elementary schools there was much more of a presence of smoking in the kids’ lives, they all knew what it was and were at that age when they started wondering why. It was valuable for PURE to teach them strategies to say no. Most of them would be offered their first cigarettes in the next few years. It didn’t have nearly the same immediacy for the preschoolers though.

Before I felt we were simply prepping the elementary school kids for something coming up next but with the preschoolers, you could just tell the message wasn’t resonating. They were like when Al watched commercials explaining about how to pick the best health insurance. It didn’t matter to Al and this didn’t matter to the kids. When we talked to them after the nap, this fact became clear.

I listened to Violet debriefing the PURE guinea pigs.

“What’d you like most about today’s activities?”

“The balloons.”

“I like the balloons, too. What did you learn about with the balloons?”

“Fire breathers are awesome.”

“They are pretty cool. Did you learn anything about the lungs?”

“I want to learn how to breathe fire.”

“Maybe when you’re a little older, did you learn anything about the lungs, though?”

“I want to learn how to breathe fire... with my lungs.”

“Okay. Do you at least not want to smoke?”

“Definitely not.”

“That’s great. Why not? Something you learned today?”

“No.”

“Well why don’t you want to smoke then?”

“My uncle does. They make you smell bad. He smells bad.”

Violet contemplated the answer. The kid took her silence as a need for further clarification.

“I don’t want to smell bad. I smell good. Look.”

The child extends arm. Violet feels obliged and smells the arm.

“Mmmm, smells like fruit. Smells good.”

“Told you.”

We ran through the same routine for the PM class and headed back to the same high school auditorium. There was a follow up meeting to the first portion of the preschool campaign.

“How’d it go?” Margot said into the microphone.

A few positive shouts came but overall there was a large and telling silence.

“Great for you guys,” she said to a group in the front who had cheered. “And to the rest of you, please keep trying. These things take time, lots of things are going to change, but the cause we’re working for has not.”

I understood her point, but there wasn’t a formal opportunity to criticize the new program.

“Besides getting some feedback, I’ve called you back here to present another more national approach to this *Touching Kids* program.”

A few people went up and down the aisles passing out another packet. If there’s anything I’ve learned from my time with PURE, packets and pamphlets are the primary form of communication between organizations and their members. You’d think these laminated goodies were magical from how often they cropped up.

At the top of the packet, it was titled:

THE ABCS OF NOT SMOKING

“We’re going to try to take our message to the national level,” Margot said. “As you all know, we’ve done phenomenal in the Midwest and are expanding to the coasts. These startup PURE chapters are going to take time and tons of dedicated effort. I think I can speak for everybody here when I say we are disappointed by this year’s Breathe Easies awards, but we should not be discouraged. We should learn from the Breathe Easies’ selection, they are concerned with national non-smoking.”

Somebody said, rather loudly, “It’s Bullshit.”

Which gave another moron license to yell, “We got robbed.”

Margot looked up and made a fanning motion with her hands.

“I love your guys’ passion for PURE, but let’s cool down. Let’s harness that energy.”

Violet looked skeptically at Margot on stage. The gears in her head were turning as she watched this unfold.

“Let’s face facts though. Instead of complaining about how unfair the system is, let’s adjust to the system. This is going to be the first of many programs in our *Touching Kids* campaign. I’d love to hear from any of you with ideas for cheap and effective ways of getting our word out nationally.”

Violet’s brown eyes widened at this statement. There were dozens of pretty legit ideas that Margot shot down with no explanation, answering simply to anybody who pushed for their concept too hard, “Are you going to tell me what’s best for the organization *I* founded?”

I rubbed Violet’s knee to try and stop it all from flashing red.

“I don’t want to toot my own horn,” Margot said.

Translation: she was going to boast and brag next.

People use these types of conversational disclaimers every day. They say “no offense but” where they’re about to say something offensive, “no disrespect” when they’re about to say something fairly rude.

Lydia uses this technique all the time. She thinks that by acknowledging that something she did was bad that makes it all better.

For example:

“I know this was bad but,” Lydia said to me in study hall, “I was emotional from the breakup with Al and kind of drunk, so I kind of, sort of fooled around with Steve at the party when Danielle (Steve’s longtime girlfriend) left the party.”

“Lydia!?”

“What?” she said. “I said I knew it was bad...”

Your own host is guilty of this, too.

Once, his Uncle Jeff asked him to be respectful and yours truly said “I tried my best to be.”

So reader beware when you hear one of these *acknowledging but still going to say/do whatever anyways* statements.

“I don’t want to toot my own horn,” Margot said, trying to look humble, “but this new program I’m about to unveil has been something I’ve had in the works for a while. It’s pretty innovative and if we’re implement it the way I’ve dreamed up this brainchild of mine, then we’re going to be the envy of not only anti-smoking organizations like TRUTH but any nonprofit that is trying to make an real and substantial impact on children.”

Horn officially tooted.

“The ABCs of Not Smoking is my new a nationwide art contest for children under the age of 8. The kids will submit crayon drawings of things that they can do instead of smoking. One activity per each letter and once we pick the winners, we’ll give them their own awards of some kind. Then, we’ll take the 26 winning pieces and put them together in a poster which will be the ABCs of Not Smoking. I’m currently working out a deal with printers but we don’t need to worry about that now. Your mission, PURE’s mission, at the moment is to take these entry forms and distribute them to kindergartens and elementary schools across the country.

“Make sure to pick up your distribution package, read through it, and we’ll have a meeting next week and start this portion of the campaign. Thanks everybody.”

Violet and I maintained our composure until we got into my car and drove off.

“Balloons and naptime songs?” Violet said. “This isn’t the PURE I signed up for. I do get that we can’t just sit on our hands and knees until a new batch of fourth graders comes. Honestly, preschoolers could give two shits about smoking. Nobody is offering up cigs to them. They’re too young for any of this to have an impact.”

“The lullaby freaked me out.”

Violet nodded. “Resembled brainwashing a bit too much for my taste.”

“The ABCs are the next level of Margot going further off the deep end—”

“Actually,” Violet said, “I don’t mind that one. At least it makes the kids critically think about how to cope with the temptation of smoking.”

“You think?”

“If the posters are distributed back to the kids, they could be guides for them to have in the back of their heads when the time comes.”

I was surprised Violet was siding with Margot on this one. She wasn’t shy about being critical of Margot, at least with me, so when she held a punch it meant Margot had probably did something right.

But even a blind squirrel finds an acorn every once and a while.

“We’ll see.”

We pulled into Violet's driveway. Her father was doing his daily Pilates in the living room.

"Coming in?" Violet said.

I looked with dread at the window. Violet's dad in his tie-dye shirt, long hair pulled back in a green bandana.

"Yep."

We walked in the front door.

"Hey, guys".

"Hey, Dad."

"Hi, Mr. Bennington."

"Please, Chance. You know to call me Barry. There's some white tea steeping in the kitchen. Help yourselves. I'm almost done."

It shouldn't be a shock to anyone that Mr. Bennington—I mean, Barry, is a vegetarian. The man practically lives off granola and dried fruits. Violet's parents are quite a pair. One won't dare eat red meat while the other won't quit smoking. It's a sight to see when Daisy sit having her morning smoke on the porch steps while Barry does his morning power yoga on the front lawn, munching on organic trail mix.

"Thanks, Dad."

"Thanks, Mr. Bennington—I mean, Barry."

Violet's dad always had good tea from an exotic location. Always fair trade, though. He shopped at various Asian markets around town, trying new herbal medicines or supposedly purifying dishes.

He came in as we talked about our plans for the Snooty Snoot drive. We dress up, go to somewhere with some culture (i.e. art museums) and pretend to be high class socialites and try to eat a meal we can pretend is fancy, like a shrimp scampi, all the while talking in the snottiest tone.

I know. Weird.

But isn't that what love is? Having fun doing the weird things you'd look utterly insane if you were doing by yourself?

Love is having a partner in the mischief and insanity.

"How's PURE going?"

"So-so."

"That doesn't sound enthusiastic," Mr. Bennington said. "What's the matter?"

"Can I tell you about it later?" Violet said. "Too frustrating to think about now."

"No worries."

Barry was a customer who was as cool as they come. The polar opposite of the overprotective father I was worried about meeting when I first started dating Violet, half expecting to be chased off their property with a shotgun wielding daddy.

"How's your mom doing, Chance?"

"She's doing better," I said. "Back in her routine."

"That's great," he said. "Give her my best."

"I will. How's your day going?"

"Oh, I suppose mine is pretty so-so, too."

"What's the matter, Dad?"

"Personally, everything is fine. I found that new tea today. You guys like it?"

"Very good," I said.

“You know I’m a sucker for white tea.”

“Ever since you were a kid,” Mr. Bennington said to Violet. “I’m a little bummed because I just found out about this indigenous tribe in Uganda. They’re losing the land they’ve had for generations upon generations, how it always goes. A government finds out some vulnerable people’s land is valuable for whatever reason and it’s legally pulled right out from under their feet. Listen, I’d love to tell you all about this later but I stink from this new advanced Pilates.”

Never Thumb Wrestle with a Pygmy

The next morning, I woke from an elaborate dream.

In the dream, there was a small Pygmy tribe in Africa, nowhere specific, just the Middle of Nowhere or as Al would put it, Buttfuck, Egypt. (For any of you looking for your atlases, I’ll save you the time. There’s no actual city named Buttfuck in Egypt. Not any that I know of, anyway.) The Pygmies were in a place where indoor plumbing had never been mentioned.

I want to stress I know nothing of the real Pygmy people. This was all only how they were in my dream.

Now, the Pygmies were a competitive people. They were so competitive that they thumb wrestled obsessively to pass the time. Thumb wrestling became serious business in the tribe. Young men were often not allowed to marry older Pygmy men’s daughters unless they could prove their strength and ability to protect the women by beating their potential fathers-in-law at thumb wrestling.

Within the society, poor thumb wrestlers were frowned upon and considered outcasts.

The Pygmies would hold all day wrestling tournaments before big hunts. They considered a man’s performance in these things to be a sign. Those who advanced well into the tournament and especially those who won were said to have good luck for the next day’s hunt. Those who were eliminated early on were considered to be in ill favor with the hunting gods.

During one of these thumb wrestling tournaments, a young man—a first timer—was dueling another man who died immediately after being pinned. This was initially considered an unfortunate fluke, but then the same young man killed the next three men he faced as he advanced in the tournament. The next man he was to face conceded. Nobody else wanted to thumb wrestle the young man.

The other Pygmies studied the young man’s technique and, long story short, discovered the specific way in which he applied pressure on his opponent’s thumb joint would cause instant death.

It just so happened that this particular group of Pygmy had been in a long conflict with another Pygmy tribe on the other side of the river. The two groups had been battling over fishing rights in the river.

At first, the conflict wasn’t too much of a problem because each side’s weapon did not cause much damage. Occasionally, a man would die from being drowned or being hit hard enough in the head with a rock during the minor scuffles. But in the past three generations, there had only been a total of eight deaths as a result of the tensions.

Things changed completely when this particular group of Pygmies, Southern Pygmies, discovered this new killing technique. Of course they used it on their mortal enemies, these

Northern Pygmies. Within a week, the entire male population of the Northern was extinct. The Northern Pygmy women were forced to marry the single males of the Southern Pygmies.

As it often does, the conquering did not stop there. The Southern Pygmies wandered about the countryside and went on slaughtering every tribe that they ran into each time taking the recently extinct tribesmen's wives and riches. They controlled a good deal of Africa when a TV news station in Johannesburg, South Africa got word of what was happening.

The story of the killer Southern Pygmies got picked up by larger media outlets and eventually ones in the United States. Being the most powerful nation in the world, the American government was asked by the smaller governments of Africa whose people were being pillaged by the thumb wrestling pygmies to restore order.

And people around the world wondered why God had given this seemingly insignificant tribe such an effect if obscure method of killing. Some hoped American intervention to stop the deaths would be Christianity's means of being brought to these "godless" Africans.

The American president didn't order military action against the Southern Pygmies as requested by the African government leaders. Instead, he had CIA operatives study the new lethal technique. Although the president was a deeply religious man of the Christian faith, he reasoned that God had given this tribe this unique talent so that the American government could learn it and use it as a way for US agents to discreetly kill terrorists.

There was a War on Terror going on, both in my dream and currently. But in my dream, not in real life, some Americans argued that God must have given the pygmies this new lethal ability for a reason we did not fully understand and that we should not interfere. They believed the United States should allow them to do whatever it is conquering pygmies do.

Others refuted this claim. They pointed out that God had also given people the ability to commit suicide, but that didn't mean people were suppose to do that.

After the president announced what he thought God's intentions were and the secret operations that would be the extent of American involvement in the matter, most people forgot about their original hopes. Instead of spreading the word of a Christian God, most ended up thinking the Pygmies and their victims were nothing more than helpless heathens. They thought the whole continent was getting what it deserved for not accepting Jesus Christ as their Lord and savior even though almost half of the continent considered themselves Christian.

The last news report I'd dream of said that the thumb wrestling had killed at least a dozen terrorists, although the government for obvious reasons could not say who or where these dozen accomplishments in the War on Terror were. The small tribe of pygmies had taken over the entire continent but was harmless to Europeans and Madagascar because the Pygmies were afraid to travel by boats and airplanes.

It became a running joke in America for parents to tell their children when they were acting up that they would be sent on the next flight to Africa where the pygmies would "teach them a lesson or two."

I woke up and found I had left the television on all night. I shut off the news. The dream I blamed on Mr. Bennington, I mean, Barry, Violet's dad.

Getting Lost in the Details

Violet and I roamed around the Cleveland Museum of Art, yet another free thing to do for a cheap date with some class to it. You're paying for it with your taxes, might as well use it.

We both admired the artwork. The whole way our Snooty Snoot date works is to do something cultured and assume the role of pompous bigwigs. That particular day, we were important connoisseurs who felt that Postmodernism had deeply changed the very fiber of our beings.

In my snottiest voice inflection, I said, “My wife simply needs this Van Gogh. It expresses all that is beautiful and, more important, all that is ugly in this thing we call existence, and all within the modest limits of a canvas.”

Violet had her lips puckered and her eyebrows constantly raised—her impression of four face lifts too many—and said, “I simply must have it. Money is no object”

Kidding aside, Violet was a fan of the Impressionist exhibit. I’m a sucker for black and white photography. I’m aware it’s generic and also known as wannabe artsy, but give me a break. It’s clean and concise. There’s a finality about it that you just don’t get with paintings, abstract or realist.

We sat down in front of some disturbing miniature clay statues by a Swedish sculptor. They looked like eight kinds of evil so we relocated to a new bench pleasantly placed in front of the visiting exhibit, the huge panels of Monet’s water lilies.

“What was it like—” Violet said, stopping herself midsentence.

“What was what like?” I said.

Violet tried to shrug it off. I persisted though.

“Come on now. You can’t leave me in suspense like that.”

It’s important to ask these sorts of questions in a relationship: the ones you’re afraid to ask. Because these are the ones you know you want answered. The fact that you’re nervous about asking them shows that the answer is important to you, if not completely necessary.

I’d rather lose a relationship that couldn’t hold up to real questions than have the one that survived because we didn’t ask them.

“What was it like with your mom and you growing up?” she said. “It was pretty stable for me growing up. You know how my mom and dad were planning for me. What was it like for your mom doing all of that unexpected and on her own? You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

“It’s okay. I can answer,” I said. “Just let me think back to everything.”

I was looking at Monet’s water lilies and searching through my brain. There were countless memories:

Laundromats where Robin and I went over flashcards as I learned my multiplication tables. The two of us by the great big old pine tree our old home, my mom and I learning how to play catch together. There were quiet moments as my mom sat over a pile of bills at the kitchen table. Races at the local pool during the hot summers. Over our winter breaks, we played video games for hours. There were car rides down 480 East with fresh laundry in the backseat. (We went every other weekend to Marlene’s house for free laundry, food, and grandma time.) My mother helping tie my enormously difficult ice skates in the Kent State ice rink before my hockey practice. And those trips to daycare in the early morning, when all the stars and the moon were still out for our viewing pleasure.

I didn’t know where to start with the story for Violet. The Monet painting’s details flooded me, the infinite shades of green and violet, none of the brushstrokes hidden.

“It was good,” I said simply. “Don’t get me wrong, my mom killed herself working two or three jobs at a time and I can remember all these car rides to day cares or babysitters, but that’s not what I remember, if you know what I mean.”

I stopped expecting a response from Violet, but she was just listening. Her eyes were calm.

"I remember the board games and going to play miniature golf, not the food stamps or the tons of hours I spent at somebody else's house while she worked and went back to get her Master's degree. Obviously, I don't forget all that time. I went to daycare a lot. I didn't know of what we didn't have because I'd never had it. It taught me that I don't need it. My mom went through a lot of shit, but it was a positive learning experience. I know that the long hours apart and the worries happened, but it's not what sticks out, not by a long shot."

While I was talking and staring at the painting, I got confused when I was staring down the blurry edge where two distinct shades of color met. My eyes had lost the overall shape of the painting. It looked like colorful brushstrokes but no overall picture.

"The fun is what sticks out. It was fun. I know we were poor and my mother was struggling to pay the bills but those were all such abstract things to me. I was too young to know that things were bad. Maybe that's the thing, things weren't bad."

My eyes took a step back from the Monet painting, though. And suddenly there were no brushstrokes, just the water lilies.

Violet and I both were looking at the painting.

"So it was good?" Violet said.

"It was great."

"Did your dad pay child support?"

"No," I said. "My mom took him to court and won for child support. It was a fucking joke though. He had money in Canadian banks from his work before college that he lived off of, but that money didn't factor into the judge's ruling. They only counted the little college job he had at the Kent State student center."

"How much was that?"

"Ten bucks a month."

"You're kidding," Violet said.

"I wish," I said. "On top of that bullshit, he only paid the first two months before he skipped back to Canada. So ten times two, factoring in inflation, comes to about a whopping \$24."

"Wow. I can't believe your mom did that."

"Me either."

I was fascinated with the effect of the painting. One minute it was just a bunch of colorful brushstrokes, but then if you let it wash over you, all you could see was the beautiful water lilies.

Was this is how art worked?

It was a compilation of a million little steps which you can put your microscope on at any time to try and figure out the inner workings, but the effect of the art was to make all that complex details disappear. It can be fun to get lost in the details but you had to take everything in to appreciate the beauty in it.

This was how that stained glass mosaic worked in St. Rita's church. It's a bunch of tiny jagged fucked up pieces, but it's also the entire picture of the Virgin Mary and Jesus.

"Can I ask one more question? I don't mean to be intrusive."

"You're fine."

Violet wasn't being intrusive, but something was up. Had her parents been fighting? I couldn't ever imagine Barry abandoning Violet and Daisy. Still the sensitivity in her voice let me know she had something at stake in these questions.

I decided not to press her on this, because if there was trouble at home, my girlfriend shouldn't feel added pressure. It was always clear we were an open communication relationship. No topics off limits.

"I know you want to meet your dad but what would you do, you know, when you actually met him?"

It seems stupid now, but I honestly hadn't thought about it before.

"I don't know."

New Chapter (The Family Values of the Bible)

After admiring the artwork, we headed back to my place for some dinner. Down the hall from the kitchen, I stealthily turned off the TV blaring away in my mom's room. Robin was sound asleep, missing one of *Judge Trudy*'s rulings. (The defendant was awarded \$450 for a rare cactus her roommate had taken when they moved out.) I tiptoed downstairs where Violet was putting on some music.

The whole thing seemed made to order for a dream. I was going to have a meal with my favorite girl in the world, good tunes were playing, and we were about to cook a scrumptious meal.

What more could one ask for?

I turned on the stove top and took out the pans.

"Darling, I'm famished," I said. "You in the mood for some scampi?"

"Of course, dearest. You know I can't resist a meal from Botticelli's."

Botticelli's was the name we had given—I'm not sure how we came up with it—for the fictitious restaurant we pretended to be in when we cooked.

In actuality, we were having one of those premade dinners that come in a bag. All you have to do is heat them up in a skillet.

"I don't know about the new management," I said, leaning in for a kiss.

Violet was sitting on the counter next to the oven. Those legs of her can be rather distracting when they want to be. And I can assure you, they were that night.

They're not those long, fragile-looking things that some guys like. I can't get into a girl with those really skinny legs that look like they'll break like a twig if she makes a misstep in heels. But that doesn't mean I like the short and squatty kind either that makes a girl look like a baseball catcher or, at its worst, a one of those little pug dogs.

No, Violet had the perfect mix of curves and length. Every time she crossed and uncrossed and recrossed her legs, I reminded myself to breathe.

"Managed to scrape up," I said, searching behind the cereal in the closet, "a little belated anniversary present."

I produced a bottle of Shiraz, Violet's favorite, which my mom had gotten for a Christmas present and already forgotten about. My mom doesn't care for any alcohol really.

"You are keeping up with the Snooty Snoot date protocol."

"Not really," I said. "I just wanted to make up for my poor showing at the zoo."

"Chance, stop apologizing," Violet said. "I was happy to have the day with you."

Another great thing about Violet: she meant it. I don't understand all these couples, Lydia and Al didn't do it too much, but I don't understand all these couples that put so much extra pressure on one another. Isn't the point of relationships for those involved to take the pressure off each other?

“On a completely unrelated note,” Violet said, picking up the newspaper next to her, “did you hear about this story with the dad?”

“No,” I said, only half paying attention. I know it sounds bad, but my focus had shifted back to Violet’s legs.

“Over on Moriah Street, the cops got a frantic call from this woman. She told them that her husband had been acting a little strange lately and then suddenly he was talking about killing their son.”

“Why was the guy so pissed off?”

“He wasn’t,” Violet said. “This is where it gets weirder. The guy isn’t mad at his kid. He’s going on and on about how God wants him to kill his son. That’s when the wife is freaked out so she calls the cops. They rush over and find the guy in the backyard. Now, he’s sitting there on his lawn chair and a knife, mumbling. The cops get the kid loose who’s all tied up.”

“And they haul off the guy,” I say, stirring the pasta. “I’m hoping?”

“Obviously,” she said, “they ask the guy what happened. He says it’s simple: God wanted him to kill his kid. They asked him why he didn’t go seek medical help if he was hearing voices and he brushes them off saying it wasn’t an option. Well, why didn’t he kill the kid then? Why was he sitting in his lawn chair like he’s getting ready to eat steaks off the grill? He says God changed his mind.”

“People are crazy.”

“No argument here,” Violet said.

Our meal was ready in ten minutes flat. Botticelli’s has fast service. While I took the skillet off the burner, Violet told me more about the news story. Apparently, a neighbor of the crazed father proclaim crimes like these were the product of a country that had lost its faith in God.

If these people would read scripture, they wouldn’t turn psycho all of the sudden and be trying to kill their kids. People need to learn about the family values from the bible.

“Can you grab the corkscrew opener?”

“Let’s hold off on wine.”

“You don’t like the Shiraz?”

“No, I do but I’m thinking we can save it until after dinner.”

“If you wish,” I said, putting the wine glasses in my hand down. “So do you really think this ABCs of Not Smoking is a good idea?”

Violet nodded yes and said, “She’s starting to make adjustments now because her mom isn’t handing over a blank check anymore. Margot’s mom is trying to teach her how to run an organization with limited means. The poster idea does a lot of things effectively for cheap.”

“Keep going,” I said, burning myself again as I poured the pasta into the bowls with my eyes stayed glued on Violet.

“Besides the cost of putting together these stupid little packets and postage, PURE doesn’t have to pay for all the paper and crayons like we normally do. Plus, investment of actual member’s time is minimal. Well, there’s the cost of the printer but it sounds like Margot already has a pretty good deal set up.”

We sat down at the kitchen table. I shut off the lights as Violet lit some candles.

“You’ve got a point,” I said. “It’s interactive for the kids when they color. It’s clear enough for even the preschoolers to understand the nonsmoking message. How’s your food?”

Violet took a taste test.

“Exquisite,” she said. Violet explained how the children weren’t getting the message about Billy’s balloon routine about lungs. They were only concerned about whether he could make them a dinosaur or a kitty afterwards. She thought it was smart of Margot to have the kids create a poster they could take home and use as a guide of other things to fill in the boring parts of life, a bottomless pit which was responsible for a huge chunk of smokers.

Violet had always held the belief that the majority of dangerous or harmful behavior was not done because a person is filled with emotion, but instead out of sheer boredom.

“We spit these detailed statistics about the costs of smoking to kids who’s only concept of money is allowance and plate lunches. They forget it by the next day. The poster will stick out in their minds.”

Violet made a guttural noise signifying her approval of Botticelli’s. “Mmmm-mm.”

“I know you’ve already said I shouldn’t apologize, but without getting too syrupy, I do want to say some things that I should have said at the zoo. On our anniversary.”

I could make out Violet’s smile in the candlelight.

“It’s been a little over a year since I first saw you outside the Grog Shop,” I said. “While I was pissed with Al making us miss the show and the especially the dumb asshole who blew smoke in my face, it got your attention. Once I saw you, you had my attention. In short, one thing leads to another and here we are a year later. Happy as I could have possibly imagined.”

It occurred to me that if I see that rude asshole taking a smoke break, I should thank him.

“I love your crazy dedication to PURE. I love your incredible legs. I love how you support me and help me when I’m down about anything. Thanks so much for everything you did when my grandmother died, making me feel the absolute best I could have possibly felt given the conditions. You always do that.”

She reached her hand out and rested it on mine.

“I love you, Violet. I’m not quite sure where all the past year has gone, but it’s been so much fun. But you know what the best part of this one year anniversary?”

“What’s that?” she said.

People gripe about not being young all the time, but I think the problem they have isn’t really with the age, but feeling like the best days are behind them.

“Not even all the great things we’ve done. The best part is the great things ahead of us. There’s so much that’s going to happen to us, together, that we don’t even know about.”

“You’re telling me.”

The Forces Were Larger Than Us

I felt good about the dinner. Somehow even though it was unreasonable for me to try and be 100% lovey-dovey right after the funeral, I wanted to be. I think that might be the weird part about relationships. They’re meant to take off the pressure but they also make you want to be your best, which causes you to put the pressure on yourself.

We headed to my room with my mom snoring audibly downstairs. I could feel Violet’s love. And every little cell of me wanted to reciprocate that love back. I thought of the way life had recently seemed to happen to me more than me doing anything to it.

There were millions of decisions to make, but the thing that struck at my core was completely and utterly out of my hands. It seemed that way for everyone recently.

Al desperately wanted Lydia back. I wondered if it scared Violet as much as it did me to see Al and Lydia so distant. Is that how life worked? You get close and then grow distant, hoping maybe one day that you could maybe get close again, you know, if you both wanted to.

The forces were larger than us.

It's safe to say the biggest impact on Robin's life—the woman sleeping peacefully albeit loudly, down the hall while Violet and I snuck quietly to my room—was becoming a single mother. She says yes to a date from this funny, good-humored guy she works with and within a year she finds herself in Robinson Memorial Hospital. Charlie is in a local college bar or another country.

Wherever he was, he wasn't there.

It isn't on just an individual level either, and unfortunately, it isn't hard to find an example: my family. It's not like Alzheimer's asks you if you want it? It doesn't even have the decency to call ahead.

Hello, Marlene. This is Alzheimer's. How's does next Tuesday work for you?... Oh, you're busy spending time with your grandchild? No worries. I'll check back to see what times might work for you next month. No rush.

But I wanted to know that I could make decisions. I wanted to know that I could want something and I could go and make it happen.

I knew how Violet thought of the zoo date. She was happy to see me doing all right. And that is the simple beauty of Violet. She wanted to assure me that she understood and that my poor romance during the date wasn't my fault.

The walk up the stairs didn't seem long at the time. There was no slow motion. Time did what it always did and didn't stop or give a shit about anything. It was simple. It went forward and kept going forward.

By the time we reached the top of the stairs though, I could already see myself replaying the whole encounter in my mind during idle moments in pre-calc. There I could watch it all in slow motion, reverse or fast forward, stop and start it as I pleased. As we reached the second floor hallway, I knew I would replay the sequence over and over and over whenever I damned pleased.

Those legs and that skirt, God help me. And the way she looked back, caught me looking at the goods, and smiled.

It seemed so simple.

I wanted Violet. I wanted to experience her. I'm not talking about just sex, I mean all the facets of her. I wanted her reassurance, the undying drive she had when it came to all things PURE, those legs, her thoughts and dreams. We went upstairs, me with the bottle of wine, and I wanted it all. Didn't matter what the order was. The night felt like it would last for as long as we wanted it to. There was a shared understanding that it didn't need to actually slow down, we would just bend it to our will with our minds.

There was some jazz on, old and beautiful. The wine got poured.

Ain't nobody's business if I do.

The legs, the skirt, and the smile. I couldn't begin to count how many times I've played that sequence of the stairs over and over again.

"You are the most beautiful person I've ever met," I said.

"You're drunk," she said, laughing.

"No, I'm not."

I held up my glass of wine which I hadn't taken a sip of.

“Then you’re sweet.”

After a couple healthy gulps, I refilled my glass, and said to Violet, “Why do you think your mom won’t quit smoking after the emphysema and the surgeries?”

The question was blunter than I’d wanted it to come out and for the second before she responded I wanted to pull the words back in.

“She’s stubborn, but more than that, she’s scared. She’s bought into the idea that a cigarette is relaxing, which it might be. I don’t think it always was like that. My mom didn’t start until she was a senior in high school, told me she picked up the habit when she was waiting on acceptance letters from school. It’s not that cigarettes are relaxing that are the real problem for her.”

“What’s the real problem then?”

“It’s that she’s forgotten how to relax without them.”

Violet’s work with PURE had surely stopped plenty of kids from turning into smokers and Violet’s mom loved hearing whatever the organization was up to. She donated money during collection drives. When Violet was finishing getting ready before dates, Violet’s mom would tell me how proud she was of Violet’s drive. She never mentioned trying to quit. It was as if Violet’s mom was reminiscing about missionary work her daughter was doing in a far off country not something remotely related to her (i.e. Violet’s mother’s) day to day life.

“Do you think she’ll ever quit?”

“No,” Violet said, again without hesitation. “That’s why I don’t ask. If you have a life threatening illness and go through two surgeries removing chunks of your lung, there’s no better motivation to quit than that. That ship has sailed.”

We were sitting across from each other on the bed.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“All I can do is focus on PURE,” she said.

We started to kiss. I wanted her. It seemed so easy, she was right there waiting, and just as I was about to translate my thoughts into the action, and she pulled away. I initially worried about my breath but then it came clear that Violet had eaten the same thing.

“What is it?” I said.

Her eyes were desperate. She didn’t answer.

“What is it?”

“I’m pregnant, Chance.”

Have I mentioned how much of a bitch time is? It, of course, decided to stop right there even though it wouldn’t slow down, not for a fraction of a second on those stairs. The music was playing although I didn’t hear it.

Couldn’t tell you who said what.

“What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know.”

Chocolate Chip Cosmology

I called Lydia the next morning.

There were some grumbles and sounds like the phone had been dropped before a groggy, “Hello.”

“You find a job already?” I asked.

“No.”

“Me neither. Let’s go pick up applications.”

“Chance,” Lydia said, “it’s 8 in the morning. I’m ridiculously hung over. Craig’s party was last night.”

“We can grab coffee before. My treat.”

I had already had half a pot of coffee by myself last night, not that I needed it to keep myself awake but rather to keep myself functioning.

“My hair smells like beer. I tried to do a keg stand last night but it didn’t work out as well as I had anticipated.”

“Take a shower.”

“I don’t even know where we’d go yet.”

“I researched some places that say they’re hiring,” I said. “Filled out the ones that had online applications. I can show you those sites later.”

“What’s the rush?” Lydia said.

“No reason. We’ve been talking about this for a while and I want to get the ball rolling finally.”

“Can’t we go in the afternoon after I’ve slept and gotten the booze out of my system?”

“We’re just going to run into these places and pick up the applications. In and out.”

There was a sigh on the other end of the telephone.

“Please, Lydia.”

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll be ready by 8:45. I’m taking you up on the coffee offer.”

A manila file folder was sitting on the bed I hadn’t slept in last night. It had a list of local businesses and restaurants that were taking applications. My resume had, unfortunately, not taken long to write last night. The thought of online applications hadn’t struck me until about two in the morning. I was too tired to be annoyed by the extensive intrusiveness of the applications.

Most of them used the same survey at the end, a measure of your personality. For each of the 65 questions you had to pick with how much you agreed with the statements on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being the most you could agree with something and 1 being you completely disagreed with something.

Most of them were easy to pick the “best” option.

An employee is justified to steal company product in some situations like when he or she feels their pay is not adequate.

People are human and being human means not being able to control one’s emotions at all times.

Employers should consider lateness a given for employees.

These are 1s—completely disagrees—even though it’s probable that somebody working at a low wage job might not have enough money to pay the bills and it isn’t a mortal sin if they steal a burger to scarf down on their break before they go back in to kill themselves for the rest

of their double shift. This is not what we tell them though. This is not where you make your stand for individuality.

Expressing your individuality in your honesty on a job application is like sharing your feelings in prison. They don't care about it and you're probably going to get fucked anyway.

Lydia jumped in my car. The faint hint of beer was in the air as we pulled down the street.

"I think I washed off all the beer," Lydia said. "Did you smell any?"

"No."

"Good," she said. "You missed a good party last night. Craig's parents were out of town and that boy knows how to have a party. Oh, I have a correction from earlier. I did a successful keg stand last night, but with my alcohol-induced supreme confidence, I tried it a second time which didn't turn out so well."

"You got to watch out for that."

"What?"

"Alcohol-induced supreme confidence."

"It's gotten me in more trouble than you can imagine," Lydia said. "Where we thinking for today's excursions?"

"Here's the list," I said, handing her the productiveness of my pregnancy-induced insomnia. "I figure we can go as far as we can through the list, grab coffee and fill them out there, and then drop them back off."

"My understanding is that you're paying for coffee, correct?"

"Correct. I did finally win a couple bucks from Al at *Maury* this week."

We stopped at the grocery store near the high school, a couple gas stations off the highway exit, the post office, public library, and Buddy's Burgers. Lydia, for many reasons, is not the ideal girlfriend but she is a superb friend who happens to be a girl. She doesn't need to talk about shopping, could give two shits about the latest high school gossip, and actually says educated things during the course of a televised football game. As long as you're not bumping uglies with Lydia, she's even-keeled and another good hang out buddy.

"How's Violet been?"

"Fine," I said, trying to act calm.

"What's she been up to?"

Did Lydia already know?.

"The normal stuff."

"The normal stuff?"

"You know: school, PURE, things like that."

"I like her," Lydia said. I could see my paranoia had already set in about other people finding out.

"If you haven't noticed, I don't normally get along with girls. All they have to talk about is whatever boy they're trying to get with or what diet they're on or how some other girl is such a whore. But I get along real easy with Violet."

Because of Lydia, Sarah, the only girl who has been friends with Lydia for more than a year, has the scars to prove it: a burn on her left arm from Lydia's hair straightener (sixth grade) and a small missing patch of hair behind her right ear (freshman year).

Sarah never wears tank tops, always a tee shirt that'll cover up the burn. Her hair is always down to keep the bald patch hidden.

“She’s a sweetheart. I like the way you guys do the no pressure thing. Al would always do so many things for me, nice things, but I’d have to bitch to get them done. It shouldn’t be like that.”

“Can I ask you about that?”

“About Al?”

“Sure.”

Things had been more than awkward since the breakup. For my sake and theirs, I hoped for them be able to tolerate each other.

We could have gone to the bookstore to pick up applications, but I was going to wait until I’d dropped Lydia off. I knew if we went I wouldn’t be able to resist running to the parenting guides. A human being was growing inside of Violet as I looked for low wage jobs with no experience and no resume.

I had wanted God to explain the thinking behind human suffering, but now all I wanted was for Violet’s pregnancy to come with a user manual.

If you’re ever trying to avoid thinking about your own mistakes, it helps to focus on others’.

“You think you guys will ever have a real truce again?”

“I hope so,” she said. It was sincere. “He still isn’t ready to accept that we’re over. Al can accept it sometimes, but only for a short while. It’s almost like he forgets what’s happened and then mid-conversation he remembers and he’s got to get on his high horse about some shit that wasn’t a problem when we were together. And frankly, I’m getting tired of dealing with a schizophrenic.”

“He’s still hurt.”

“So am I.”

This was the first time I could remember Lydia mentioning a negative emotion besides *I’m pissed* or *I’m fucking pissed* or *I’m going to cut this fucker*.

“I’m sorry.” The only thing I could think to say.

“I’ll be fine,” she said. “I hope he will be.”

We drove another half a block before she added, “Watch after him for me, okay?”

I nodded in agreement. We pulled into the parking lot of our next stop, Crazy Ed’s cell phones.

“No way, dude.”

Lydia folded her hands across and leaned back in her seat.

“What’s the problem?”

“I’m not going to work for some cell phone company,” Lydia said. “The government uses cell phones to track down people. Big brother’s way of keeping close tabs on us.”

“Explain,” I said.

Try to focus on Lydia’s craziness instead of thinking about how I had never even changed a diaper.

“Everybody is so happy now because they have phones to carry with them wherever they go and if they get lost they can just use the GPS on their phones and get directions to anywhere. The government always finds a way to use technology to spy on its own people. The telephone is invented and wire tapping’s next. It’s the natural relationship of the government and innovation.”

I knew they were hiring floor salesmen and that there was no budging Lydia.

“I’m going to run inside and get an application.”

“Okay.”

For all her obsessions with conspiracies, she never looked down on people who didn't believe in her. She never got frustrated unless somebody wouldn't listen. Lydia took the whole you-can-lead-a-horse-to-water approach with her tabloid information.

When I came back to the car, Lydia wanted her caffeine fix. We headed to Loco Larry's Lattes.

Brandon was working. If you don't recall, he was somewhere in the middle of Lydia's 23ish sexual conquests, which isn't all that important to know, but I did get my Loco Cocoa for free because of their previous cordial relations. Lydia got a Loco Latte and a chocolate chip muffin as big as my head.

About two applications in, Lydia was finally starting to wake up. You could tell because she had another discovery to tell me about. Also, she had chugged down her first drink and gone up for seconds.

She opened the lid and was taking in the smells of the latte.

"Why does everything taste better when it costs \$Free.99?"

"It does seem to enhance the flavor," I said. "Although, you didn't quite get that for \$Free.99."

"I didn't pay for it."

We found a seat at a table in the corner of the café.

"You didn't pay for it with cash, but you did pay for it with your—what's the word I'm looking for—services."

She smiled. Lydia could take a joke.

"If Brandon wishes to show me gratitude for the effort I put in, then he may. But trust me, if I was turning tricks, I wouldn't be filling out an application to Mammoth Video Mart right now."

"Good point."

I liked the loudness of the store. It gave me a sense of cover. There were so many other things not to focus on besides myself. People in suits on their way to important meetings, students cramming for exams, which would direct any people watchers away from this guy filling out applications. I hoped they'd be distracted from me and not be able to discover my secret.

We started filling out applications with the sound of coffee grinders and milk steamer going off.

"Has your physics class talked about the Big Bang yet?"

"No, we're still on projectile motion."

"Seriously?" she said. "We were done with that in December."

"I can't say I've learned anything since November but I'm not complaining. Less work. But I know a little about the Big Bang: the huge explosion at the start of the universe."

"Mr. Burns went through that but then he was telling us about how the Universe will end."

She stopped and waited until I said, "Go on."

"The Big Bang happens, BOOM and all, and then everything—every planet, star, solar system, galaxy—is shot out from wherever that point where the Big Bang occurred. You've heard the Big Bang is expanding, right?"

I nodded and sipped my Loco Cocoa.

"Think about what that means. Everything is getting further and further away from each other—"

“The solar system isn’t spreading out. The earth is still pretty close to the moon.”

“Not the little clusters of stuff, but the galaxies.”

“If there was a Big Bang, how does that mean everything’s getting further apart?”

“Here,” she said, holding up her chocolate chip muffin. “Before this is cooked, all the chocolate chips are pretty close together. The muffin expanding as it cooks is the Big Bang’s effect. Everything going from one center point and the chocolate chip galaxies get further and further apart.”

“Weird,” I said, picking up my pen thinking that was the end of Lydia’s science lesson.

“No, it’s more than weird. Think about the ramifications of this.”

“Such as?”

Lydia was in full stride.

“There’s only so much gas, fuel, whatever in the stars. Everything gets further away from everything else and everybody’s stars die out when they’re out of gas. Life doesn’t seem to happen without energy from sunlight—star energy. No more life. Everything gets cold.”

“Cheerful.”

“Unless...” Lydia took a healthy sized bite out of her muffin.

“Unless what?” I said. “You can’t just tell me the universe is doomed and go ‘unless’.”

“Mr. Burns told us about this thing called Critical Mass. Ever heard?”

I shook my head no.

“So everything has mass. Mass causes gravity. Gravity pulls things together—”

She started coughing and sipped her latte.

“Little universe went down the wrong pipe,” Lydia said. “Gravity pulls things together. Scientist figured out that if the universe had enough mass—Critical Mass is what they call it—then everything would be pulling at everything else enough to slow down the expansion and eventually turn it around.”

Lydia gave Brandon a look which I guess was intended to be seductive. It looked more constipated than anything else to me, but Brandon gave Lydia a suggestive grin right back.

“If there was enough mass in the universe, then things would eventually start pulling back together and they’d all make it back to that same point. Probably another Big Bang, and BOOM, the universe is born again.”

Lydia smiled in a way that said she was done with her presentation. She started to write on an application as if that were the end of the story.

“So?” I said.

“So what?”

“So is there enough mass in the universe to keep it going?”

She seemed to have really forgotten this detail. “No. They measured it and there was like a fiftieth of what we’d need for Critical Mass. What do you think I’d have to do to get a bagel? Take Brandon out back by the dumpster?”

“Lydia...” I didn’t say this because of the prostitution joke but she took it that way.

“Relax, I’m not hungry.”

Promises

The night before, Violet burst into tears. I didn’t know what to say. It was terrible.

“We’re not supposed to be having kids,” she said, getting in some gasps of air in between the tears.

It struck me as odd that she used the plural, babies, but I knew it best to shut my trap on this detail. My mind pushed out thoughts of twins.

I held her. Her shoulders shook with each sob. It might only seem this way to me because I’m a guy but it’s harder for me to pin down ladies’ ages. During PURE meeting, Violet could seem like a young professional out of business school, and then, we’d be laughing from doing something stupid and she’d have the innocence of a little girl, and we’d be in the backseat of my car and it felt like we had been born on the same day, in the same minute.

I couldn’t stand to see her cry and the shock still hadn’t worn off. Life was getting to be this way. Everybody seemed like they were either going through shock, fighting with the reality of coming out of shock, or waiting cautiously for the next shock to come along.

“We’ll get through this,” I said.

“Promise?” she said.

“Promise.”

It was the only thing I was sure of at the time.

God’s Butt

Lydia wasn’t budging from Loco Larry’s until Brandon’s shift was over.

“Can we get going, Lydia?”

“Chance, we just filled out six applications and it’s not even one o’clock, yet.”

“Still.”

“Hold on,” she said. “He’ll be done in five minutes. You sure you don’t want anything else?”

I wanted to leave right then and there. If I didn’t have a job by the afternoon, my future child will be stuck below the poverty line forever. But trying to budge Lydia in pursuit of a male is like trying to get Al somewhere on time.

I said with a sigh, “Mucho Mocha please.”

Lydia mouthed the word Mocha to Brandon wiping off a table across the room.

I wasn’t much of a coffee drinker, however, the lack of sleep was finally starting to set in and I knew I’d need a little caffeine boost to keep the ball in motion.

“Aren’t you worried about the Universe dying?” I asked.

Lydia stopped staring down Brandon.

“Why should I be?”

“You tell me you know how there’s not enough matter in the universe and it’s just going to die out, cold and spread out over countless light years, and you act like you told me there’s a 30% chance of rain tomorrow.”

“It’s a 60% chance of rain,” she said. “There’s a cold front coming in.”

“Lydia.”

“What? You want me to tell you something to worry about? I tell you the government is using the people’s cellular phones to know where you are at any moment and, surely, they are able to listen in on whoever’s conversation they damn please at any time. See: the Patriot Act. And I don’t flip out when you don’t give two shits, walk right in and pick up an application.”

Brandon stopped by the table.

“One Mucho Mocha,” he said.

“Thanks.”

“And here’s your stuff, Ms. Lydia.”

He smiled with half of his mouth, rather slyly.

“Why, thank you,” Lydia said. She bit her bottom lip, suggestively. “What are you up to tonight?”

“Going to Kent State for a party. Want to come?”

“I’d love to.”

“I’ve got to go pick up my little brother now, but can I call you later?”

“Of course you can,” Lydia said, giving him the flirty eyes.

“Cool. See you, Chance.”

He walked out the door and Lydia looked like she was about to pounce right then and there. She was a bright girl and I respected that she never pulled this temptress crap with me. Lydia pushed this sex kitten persona when she wanted something, whether it be a chocolate chip muffin or sex.

As Brandon walked out the door, she stopped biting her bottom lip. Every flirtatious vibe was gone instantly and she was again all business. She look to me like I’m just called her fat and said, “You want something to worry about? I’ll give you something to worry about.”

I wanted to tell her there was already plenty to worry about that she didn’t know.

We had piled back into the car.

“What’d you make out with?” I said.

“Two blueberry bagels, two slices of New York cheesecake, and half of a spinach-feta quiche. You’re not getting any, either, in case you were wondering.”

After stops at Hank’s Hardware, the pharmacy, Perfect Purchase (an electronics store), and the 24 hour deli on Main Street, we ended up at the library which killed two birds with one stone—grabbing applications and having space to fill them out.

“That politician I told you guys about, John Edwards, definitely was banging that chick on the side.”

“Did the news report the affair?” I said. “Did he admit it?”

“He didn’t admit it,” Lydia said, nodding yes. “*The National Enquirer* ran another article about the woman.”

Which for Lydia was as solid as gold. However, I did not point this out because I was trying to get back on Lydia’s side after coffee. I felt my personal safety would be risked if I didn’t and I needed to be healthy to work to buy baby formula.

“She worked on his presidential campaign,” she said. “Some video production stuff for his television promotional ads. Bet you they made a sex tape.”

“No politician is that stupid.”

Lydia glanced at me and kept going.

“Here let me grab the issue.”

She pulled out the latest *National Enquirer*. It didn’t look new. The pages were dog-eared and the margins were filled with Lydia’s almost incomprehensible writing. They say you can tell a lot about a person by their handwriting. You didn’t need an expert to see Lydia’s passion, or obsession, in this sort of things.

Look back to story from Nov. 14 (JFK Alive and in Bermuda): connections apparent.

I read about the woman who Edwards allegedly had an affair with.

The article still consisted of a good deal of circumstantial evidence, blurry pictures of men with expensive haircuts and pasty white skin, and too many exclamation points. Lydia didn't have to be convinced to believe the stories.

In fact, it was the opposite with her: she had to be convinced not to believe them.

By the time I was done with the articles, Lydia had already gone back to filling out applications, the move of a lawyer sitting back down and nonchalantly saying, "I rest my case."

Maybe I was missing something. How could a perfectly intelligent girl bound for college take rumor mill tabloid stories as factual statements?

Below the John Edwards article was this little ditty:

Man Sees God Almighty's Butt.

Mo, a man who by his neighborhood is by all accounts shy in demeanor and speech, claims to have seen God himself last weekend. Mo did not see the Heavenly Father's face though, and claims the Creator only allowed the man a brief glimpse of his backside.

Conservative Christians are angered, claiming this is the work of the pro-Gay liberal agenda propaganda machine.

For obvious reasons, I put the tabloid back down. I didn't have enough time for this. There were countless applications to fill out to jobs that wouldn't make nearly enough money. I didn't have enough money in my bank account to fill up my gas tank. The fact that Brandon had given us free coffee at Loco Larry's Lattes was a lifesaver. Loco Cocoas had suddenly become a luxury I couldn't afford.

Violet and I were about as good as it gets for couples, especially for our ages. I wasn't ignorant to the difficulties of keeping a relationship even for relatively sane people. How many horrible breakup stories do you know of offhand?

I mean, for Christ sake, this kid from my high school is a perfectly reasonable guy, involved in student government, likes sports, and kind to whomever. But he gets into a relationship, a long-term one that he doesn't know how to break it off after it has already gone sour. Puts up with her shit a year and a half longer than he should have, but she goes off to college—she's a little older—and decides to study abroad for a semester in Europe, Luxemburg to be exact. First week she's there, he decides to break up with her.

This perfectly decent guy doesn't break up with her on the phone though. What does he do? He writes an email. A fucking email. I'm not saying I don't still like the kid, he's a standup guy and I'm not saying the girl wasn't a complete fucking bitch, griping and grouching every chance she got. Three years and she gets dumped in an email. She was a total drag, unpleasant in every way, but nobody deserves to get dumped in an email.

Again, he's a goodhearted guy.

What I'm trying to say is that relationships tend to make people, well, a little crazy.

No matter what we ended up doing, I knew I wanted to stick by Violet. She was the definition of a keeper.

Earlier at the coffeehouse, Lydia and I were sitting there looking at the menu. It had a ton of options. There were Crazy Chai Tea Lattes, Loco Lattes, Mucho Mochas, and plenty of others.

"What are you going to get?" I said to Lydia.

"I don't know," she said. "What are you going to get?"

“A Loco Cocoa.”

“You always get that.”

“It’s so good though.”

“I know it’s good but I’ve already had that,” Lydia said, her eyes still glued to the menu board behind the counter. “There’s so much I haven’t tried yet.”

And it struck me then that that was the difference between Lydia and I.

If I knew something was good, I stuck with it. I didn’t need to try everything else to know it tasted great to me. Now sure, if Loco Larry’s took the Loco Cocoa off the menu, I would try and find another drink that I enjoyed.

Lydia, on the other hand, knew the Loco Cocoa tasted amazing but the thought of all the other untried drinks she hadn’t had yet made her want to try everything at least once, maybe more than once. Until then, she couldn’t be sure that the Loco Cocoa was what she wanted. She’d inevitably wonder what all the other drinks were like and speculate which ones were better than what she’d gotten.

Somehow I always forgot about this unbearable indecisiveness Lydia had when it came to ordering. She had to carefully explore all the routes in her mind and even after that, she was still right where she began, quietly muttering, “Uhhh...”

I thought of Violet, happy to have my Mucho Mocha.

Tricky Moon

The night Violet told me she was pregnant, we talked for a while about what we might do. We talked about what we knew and what we didn’t. The only thing we knew is that we’d work as one on this. Nothing would be ruled out. Nobody should be uncomfortable or feel wrong about suggesting anything. Ask the questions you need to ask we, we said to each other. Say the things you need to say. Still, we both didn’t have a clue where to start the conversation. We agreed to think about it for a little while and talk about it again later in the week, hopefully with more information.

After Violet had gone home, I searched for jobs and local businesses for hours. I stopped about a half an hour after I realized there were more places on my list than I’d be able to fill out applications for in one week.

After that, I filled out a half a dozen job online job applications until it was becoming clear that I had stopped thinking clearly when I filled out an application for Nina’s Pitas twice.

The moon was still out there. It was a new moon where the moon is in between the sun and the Earth so we can only see its shadow and it’s all black. A new moon is the trickiest phase. You look out into the night’s sky and think there’s no moon out. Nothing to see, but trust me, the moon is always out there.

If you look hard enough, the tricky deceptive little fucker is always out there.

I was proud of all Robin had done. I knew she had practically killed herself to make it here. To get us here, and if I can speak for myself, I turned out pretty damn good besides the whole getting-my-girlfriend-pregnant-my-junior-year-of-high-school thing.

I had my chest puffed out every time somebody new in my life asked about my childhood.

But I knew my story was rare. Besides maybe winning the lottery, the story of my mother and me making it was the best possible outcome given the initial, and bleak, circumstances.

That's what stuck into my mind, how lucky we had gotten built on the blood, sweat, and tears of Robin.

People work and work and work and don't get half as far as my mom did.
Needless to say, it scared the shit out of me.

B is for _____

Coach Maynard had to attend been forced to attend a mandatory "sensitivity training course" after calling one of his wrestlers a "fucking puss" who was just "bitching 'cause they he was on the rag."

So wrestling practice was cancelled for two days.

Al and I made plans to go thrifting.

Since the cancelled Azimuth Dream show, Al had lost, at least, fifteen pounds. He had thrown himself into wrestling. It wasn't that he wasn't dedicated before. But there was a new level of intensity.

On days before meets, he carried a bottle that was a solid green from class to class. I didn't think much of it, besides maybe that he was trying to keep hydrated before his matches, but soon found out there was no water in the bottle. It was for spit. Al would spit into the bottle throughout the day, trying to lose as much water as possible to make weight.

His always kept his legs bouncing, trying to burn every available calorie.

We never saw him at the lunch table anymore. He would skip eating and go to the empty gymnasium to run laps.

I suspected this new tunnel vision concentration had more than a little to do with Lydia.

"So how's wrestling going?" I said, rifling through a rack of button up shirts.

"Good," he said. "Coach, thinks I have a shot at State's this year."

"Wow. That's big."

Our school had been infamous for the lack of our athletic accomplishments. There was the basketball team which hadn't kept a game within twenty points all season. Our quarterback spent most Friday nights with his back on the ground, looking up at the sky, and a rival team's defensive player doing some sort of dance over him. Most infamous of all though was our soccer team. In two and a half seasons, they hadn't scored a goal. They were ecstatic when they finally ended a game tied, 0-0.

"Maynard thinks I could get a scholarship if I make it to State's," Al said.

"He's a douchefuck but that's awesome that he thinks so highly of you."

"He can be a real douchefuck sometimes, but he's got connections and he does know technique. Anything going on with PURE?"

"We're doing this whole new program," I said, rifling through the sweaters. "We've already got the elementary schools covered so now we're moving to younger kids."

"You going to nurseries?" he said, smiling but not looking up from the sweaters.

"It's not quite that bad," I said. "Yet. It's preschoolers and kindergarteners now. But right now, we're launching a national coloring program."

He looked up, his eyebrow raised.

"What exactly does coloring have to do with smoking or not smoking?"

Our local thrift store provides an interesting mix of clientele. There are people like me and Al who have comfortable living situations and have come for the sale. We're here to be

selective and put together generally classy outfits from the hodgepodge. But there's also the genuinely needy, parents who are trying to find a way to properly clothe their children for the unpredictable and harsh winter weather that often is Northeast Ohio.

A dad with a beer gut and permanent bags under his eyes was holding up coats in front of his little girl, trying to find something to keep her warm.

Would that be Violet and I in a few years?

I worked to shed that image in my mind

"The idea is each kid colors something for a letter. Say they pick B. Then, they've got to draw some activity they can do instead of smoking that's got to start with the letter B: Building a Snowman, Backflips—"

"Blowjobs."

"Huh?"

"If I had to draw something for B, I'd draw Blowjobs."

He looked like he thought this was one of the better ideas of the twenty-first century.

"How are you going to draw Blowjobs?" I said, adding, "Mind you, these are in crayon."

Al looked up and his eyes seemed to search the ceiling for answers.

"I'll have to get back to you on that."

"So you're saying instead of smoking, you'd rather be giving blow jobs?"

"No, you know that's not what I meant," he said. "Receiving."

"That'd have to go under R then, Receiving Blowjobs."

I held up an argyle sweater. Al's eyes squinted as he examined the potential buy. He pondered it.

"You going to put a collared shirt underneath that?"

"Of course."

"Okay then," he said, giving a casual thumbs up.

"Anyways, if you ask me, the whole *Touching Kids* thing is taking it a step too far. I bet most of the kids we're talking to don't even know what smoking is yet."

"From an outsider's perspective," Al began, before saying, "What do you think of this?"

He was holding up a military green cargo jacket.

"I could see that."

"Cool. Like I was saying from an outsider's perspective, it's a bit creepy. Anytime people are pushing something to little kids, it strikes me the wrong way."

I wandered over to the shoe section. I stopped right in the middle of checking out these snazzy brown leather boots when the same dad and little girl came to check out size 3 boots.

"Look, I'm not a fan of it either but Margot's got a damn strangle on everything and there isn't anything left to do with the elementary schools. It's a waste of time, yes, but I don't think it's dangerous. Most of the kids don't even pick up on the anti-smoking thing. They just want us to make them fucking balloon animals and pass out the chocolate milk before nap time."

We went through most of the clothes. Al ended up buying the military-style jacket and some long sleeve thermals. I got the argyle sweater and a pair of jeans.

"Anything else been up with you?" Al said on our way home.

Oh, I don't know, maybe I could have told him about this *Maury* re-run the night before and guy was on before the first commercial break. I wanted to tell Al about how much this simpleton looked like a deer in headlights as the talk show host opened up the results envelope, I'd tell Al about how this guy on the show didn't have the slightest clue but how I'd been dumb

enough to put my life's saving on this guy not getting his girlfriend, the good looking one with those great legs, pregnant with no diploma, no job, and no hope.

But instead I turned up the music and said, "Nothing at all."

Let's Just Go Back Downstairs

Violet and I got together after school. It had been two days since our bun was officially declared in the oven.

Our phone conversations were sparse. We dared not mention the elephant in the room.

Violet would tell me about her recent PURE work. She had been helping Margot locate a printer for the ABCs of Not Smoking poster and on coming up with packets that explained to PURE members how to assemble and mail out packets to schools.

I would tell Violet about my job hunt. I had been calling back all the places where I had filled out applications.

"When did you drop off your application?"

"Yesterday," I would say.

There would be a silence before they said what they all said: *Wait a week and call back if you haven't heard from us by then.*

But—

Click.

I heard a knock on the door downstairs and my mom opening the door.

"Violet!" my mom said. The same voice she used on Christmas mornings when she opened a gift she had been secretly hoping for. "The Idiot is upstairs. Are you hungry at all? There are some leftovers I could heat up."

"No, I'm all right."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, thank you though, Ms. Williams. How you been?"

"Oh, the crazies are acting up again," my mom began.

The crazies are also known as the students of the Cleveland Public Elementary school she teaches at. "Somebody threw a boom box stereo out of the window, yesterday. Then, another knucklehead jumped out of the same window. Didn't hesitate. Just dove right after it."

I was at the top of the stairs by this point watching the two converse.

"Oh, no." Violet put her hand over her open mouth. "Is the kid okay?"

"He's fine," my mom said.

Robin had always had this unwavering simplicity in matters of children. Right after I had slammed my hand in my grandmother's car door that one time, my mom had come home, my grandmother practically hysterical, and Robin took a look at my hand. She told my grandmother, Marlene, to relax.

"You sure he's okay?" Marlene said. "Should we take him to the hospital?"

"He's fine," she said. "Everything still looks pretty attached."

I had begun shaking my hand after that, watching closely to see if any loose parts fell off.

"The kid was lucky," my mom said to Violet, "our classroom is on the first floor and not the second. I'm telling you, the little moron didn't even think twice—or once, for that matter—about jumping out the window.

This was where I made my entrance.

“Here’s the Idiot, now. You sure you don’t want any leftovers? I’m just going to end up throwing them away.”

I waved the offer off, putting my hand on my stomach. There was still too much lasagna in my belly as it was.

“We should get to stuffing these envelopes.” Violet readjusted her backpack strap. The pack looked heavy.

“For the coloring thing?”

We shook our heads.

“I’m proud of you two. I know you guys work hard with all your PURE stuff. Thankfully, I never have to worry about you two doing stupid things.”

Which I imagine might be something like getting pregnant while still in high school.

“Like jumping out of windows,” my mom was saying. “Seriously Chance, I’m proud of how much initiative you’ve taken looking for jobs.”

“My bread winner,” Violet said. She put her arm around me. I felt like the fish being held up for a picture in an outdoorsman magazine.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into him,” Robin said to Violet. “Anyways, my show’s about to start and I’m holding you guys up from your work. Let me know if you get hungry.”

We headed up the stairs, Violet in front of me. She was wearing jeans this time but I could still clearly see her legs. The image from the other day was crystal clear.

When we got to the stop of the stairs, I grabbed her arm and was going to say something but I didn’t. I was going to suggest we just forget about the worry and the decisions we would have to make. Specifically, I was going to suggest we walk back downstairs. Maybe if we walked back down the stairs things would go back and there wouldn’t be any pregnancy. We’d just be the kids who walked up those stairs a couple of days ago, on their way to show their love for each other physically and free of consequence.

I regret to inform you, reader, that this is not how it works. So I shrugged it off and we went into my room.

The Options

“Listen,” Violet said, as soon as the door clicked shut, “I know we need to talk about this but can we pretend like we aren’t just talking about this? Could we be stuffing the envelopes and pretend like that’s what we’re supposed to be doing here? We’ll talk about everything we need to talk about but I can’t sit down and say, ‘Okay, this is the end all be all talk.’ You know the talk about whether we’re going to have this child or not, I mean, you know, the other option.”

I agreed. We sat down and Violet gave me a detailed run through of the process.

“Here,” she said. We were both sitting cross-legged on my bedroom floor. “This pile is the manila envelopes we’re going to use. And that pile of the bright blue papers are the submission entry forms for the teachers to fill out and this stack of sheets are the pages the kids will actually draw on. Finally, here are the stamps and the list of schools we’re going through.”

She was in her element. It relaxed her.

“What’s been going on at school?” she said.

“Not too much. Al’s been training really hard.”

“For wrestling?”

“Yeah, he’s been trying to move down this weight class.”

“Impossible. He’ll never give up his fast food addiction.”

“He already has.”

“Seriously?”

“I know. He’s gung-ho about it.”

“Have Lydia and him smoothed things out?”

I shook my head no.

“That’ll do it,” Violet said. “Can you pass me three envelopes?”

“Sure thing. So can we talk?”

“Aren’t we talking?”

“Can we talk about you know?”

“Don’t make it such a formal transition though. Downplay it.” She looked up from the papers and added, “Please.”

I searched my brain for a little before coming up with a new conversational topic. You couldn’t see large sections of my floor because of all the envelopes. The way Violet tossed them from outwards from where she was sitting reminded me of the stars spreading out around her, the way Lydia had told me.

“Lydia told me something interesting at the coffeehouse the other day.”

“Another trumped up conspiracy from a supermarket tabloid?”

“No, actually, this was real.”

“What is it?”

“She told me how the universe is doomed.”

“It does seem that way lately.”

She said it with such a dry tone that I had to laugh. She did, too. It was a nice break from this weighted, bogged down reality.

I told Violet about the Big Bang and the way the universe was expanding outwards from one starting point. I explained the notion of there being enough mass to pull the stars back together from this same point. “Hopefully, the gravity this would cause could get the universe to slow down from its rapid expansion, pull it all back. Otherwise stars die out. It all gets cold. We’re finished.”

“So is there enough mass?”

I wanted to say something artful to describe the destruction but the fate of the universe was summed up in a plain, “No.”

“Figures,” Violet said. “I forgot to bring more paperclips. Do you have any?”

I got up and rummaged through my desk drawers. “I looked up the scientific theories about it online. Lydia explained it well. While I was online, I looked at other pregnancy options, too.”

“Smooth transition,” she said, smiling as I passed her a box of paperclips.

“Thank you.”

I had hoped I had said enough to kick start the conversation. I fell short.

“So what do you think?” Violet said.

“I thinkkkk...” I stretched out the word, “we have a lot of options.”

Honestly, I wasn’t sure what I wanted, which is nothing to alert the media about, but I was afraid of what to say first. Whatever you say first is going to seem like the direction you want to go.

“And what do you think about those options?”

I held my breath and took the plunge. “I’m going to go through the options in no order in particular. Nothing in my mind is anywhere near made up.”

“Go for it.”

The whole time I presented my case, I watched Violet intently trying to get a read off of her body language.

“From how I see it there’s three ways to go: keep the kid, adoption, and... abortion. So what happens if we have the kid? Well, let’s not start off there. Adoption. Adoption has a lot of benefits to it. We still have the child. Infertility is on the rise.”

“Ironical,” Violet said. Her hands were still busy taking papers from piles, clipping them together, putting the contents in the envelopes, addressing, and then stamps. She kept the process going. If she stopped, she’d be having a formal talk, not a conversation over PURE duties.

“Why is that?” she said.

“No clue,” I said. “There are a lot of good happy couples out there ready for a kid. These agencies are super selective and these people have to be qualified in all sorts of ways—financially, psychologically—so we wouldn’t have to worry about them. It’s like they’re prescreened to be good parents.”

It isn’t how it works, at least I don’t think so, but there was an image of an adoption agency evaluator coming to couples, handing out certificates that said PARENT CERTIFIED. I wondered if this kind of scene was going through Violet’s mind also. I kept seeing Violet and me standing there with paper stamped DENIED.

Which brought me to my second option.

“If we had the kid,” I said, “everything we know would effectively be over. Some people say it makes their relationship stronger, other clearly point to the kid as the beginning of the end for them. I don’t see how you could still do college, at least, not fulltime. I’d get a job though. I’m getting a job now. I’d work. I’d do whatever it took. You could still go to college and get your degree in Communications. We’d get an apartment and I’d stay home while you were at class and go off to work when you came home.”

I watched for nervous ticks or slight changes in facial expression, but Violet was a blank slate.

“I did some research of my own,” Violet said.

“Did you?”

“I think it’s sweet of you to say that,” she said. “And I know you mean it. But how much could you expect to make? At best, something in the \$20,000 a year range starting off. I looked at the cost of a child from birth to college graduation.”

She droned off there.

“And?”

“And you’re looking at over \$150,000. I love that you’re that kind of guy. You would just place aside everything without second guessing so I could still go to college and that’s why I love you. But you can’t raise a kid without a good job and you can’t have a good job without going to college but you can’t go to college if you’re raising a kid.”

I sighed, understanding the limits she had reminded me of. The conversation went on this way until we had finished our stack of mailings. The more we talked, the more the factors multiplied. The decision somehow got even more complicated. Our answer got farther and farther away from us.

“We’re spinning our wheels,” Violet said, tossing another finished envelope.

“Suggestions?”

“How am I supposed to know?”

“Am I?”

The frustration of the talk had gotten to me. It had gotten to Violet too. We spoke carefully with our words. I felt like a defense lawyer for an obviously guilty defendant.

“I made a doctor’s appointment for Saturday. Let’s talk to a profession.”

A professional, it sounded good. Someone we could trust to know better.

Oh Dear

It should be no big surprise to inform you that Lydia believes dead people talk from beyond the grave. Loved ones trying to warn or encourage family and friends they left behind.

“Of course there are spirits,” she said. “They’re all around us.”

“I’ve never seen one,” I said.

“Lots of people have.”

“So what? People say they’ve seen lots of things. I haven’t seen any spirits with my own two eyes.”

“Have you ever been to Australia?”

She and I both knew I hadn’t.

“No.”

“Do you believe Australia is real?”

“Of course.”

“You don’t need to see something for it to be there,” Lydia told me.

“I’ve seen pictures other people have taken of it.”

“Same thing with ghosts and spirits you are so sure don’t exist.”

“Those could all be hoaxes.”

“So could all those pictures of cute koalas and dingos.”

I didn’t need to believe in spirits to know what my grandmother, Marlene, would say to the whole mess Violet and I had gotten ourselves into.

As the Alzheimer’s progressed, my grandmother’s brain started to lose grasp of a normal and large adult vocabulary. Her selection of words dwindled along with her need to explain the full idea behind some of our phrases.

Right before she was diagnosed, my mom was picking me up from Grandma’s house. Marlene had been picking me up from school and doing afterschool babysitting. I was practicing my ninja moves in the living room while they caught up on the day. It was still unclear whether I’d grow up to be a ninja or undercover spy back then so I was busy practicing both skill sets.

Consequently, I listened in on their conversation simultaneously train myself to whoop ass.

My mom was asking Marlene about car troubles.

“Is it something serious?” my grandmother asked.

“I’m not sure,” Robin said. “The check engine light went off when I was on my way over.”

“Probably nothing serious. I can go with you to the mechanic’s if you want.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Robin said.

“Look at him go,” Marlene said, watching my moves. “He’s the cutest little ball of energy with that mop of hair flailing around.”

I didn't acknowledge my grandmother's compliment. My self-administered spy training wouldn't allow it.

"I know Dad always uses Nero Autobody, is that where you take your car?"

"Yeah, they're dependable."

"Expensive?"

"Blueberries."

"What?"

My grandmother returned to quietly watching me. She either didn't hear or care to respond to Robin's question.

As I continued to judo chop the couch and roundhouse kick the recliner, I glanced at my mother. Robin was confused and turned her head to look outside and I followed her line of sight. She was looking at the backyard.

It was covered in snow. Blueberries wouldn't be in season for months.

My grandmother put her purse back down and said, "I've got to run the vacuum in here. It's getting dusty."

Robin didn't mention the blueberries and followed my grandmother's conversational lead. After successfully subduing every piece of Marlene's furniture, I went to get a juice box.

This pattern continued and eventually, one phrase that Marlene—at least what was left of her—started saying repeatedly.

We'd be going into a store from the parking lot, and she'd say, "Oh, dear."

We'd be walking through the park, and she'd say, "Oh, dear."

The disease kept progressing and the phrase kept on coming.

A machine gun of a recently killed soldier, rigor mortis setting in on his hand while it squeezed the trigger:

"Oh dear. Oh dear. Oh dear."

It seemed reasonable to think that this was a simple product of the wiring in her brain being effectively fried.

For a while, I dismissed it as nothing more. But I started noticing something about it.

There was one moment in particular. It was just me and her. We were sitting in her kitchen at the table. My mom or somebody else was in the next room, going to grab something and come right back.

Marlene turned her head and started looking out the window.

"Oh, dear," she said.

The thing was her eyes were always open when she said this. She'd always be looking out into the world. And now, I don't think her brain was spouting off the leftover words in her brain.

Oh, dear was Marlene's response to the world.

It seemed to fit perfectly into the recent happenings in Violet's body.

Oh, dear.

Divorce is a Bitch, Even In Heaven

I know a lot of people like Lydia believe an afterlife. They believe in a heaven.

I'm not sold on the whole thing with the puffy clouds and the white robes.

Presumably, heaven is an ideal place. Eternal bliss. Whatever you can imagine, it's better than that. The ideal of the ideals.

The mechanics of heaven are a bit blurry though.

For starters though, what age is a person in heaven? Do heaven's citizens live eternally at the age they died or at another age?

Perhaps it's the age they remember the best.

The arthritic grandfather gets to go back to his high school track days. He gets to run and run without any pain in a perpetual state of motion.

The female painter returns to the days when her creativity flowed effortlessly onto the canvas.

Sounds nice, huh?

The problem comes with the following.

So I'm assuming, and I hope this isn't too much of a stretch unless you are a hermit at heart, that in your heaven there are loved ones, both family and friends. Inevitably, though, your relationships with everybody on this list were not at their best at the same exact age.

Say you want your childhood friend to be with you there in heaven, the childhood friend being the same age of when you had your best days. Let's say, arbitrarily, age 7.

You want your loving father to be there. You want him on the puffy clouds at the age he was when you remember him best, 44, when he told you how proud he was of you and your accomplishments, you always remembering the way his beard had just started to change to gray and his eyes clear.

And then, you want the love of your life to be there too. In your heaven, the love of your life should be in heaven at the age he or she was when you two first fell thoroughly in love. Again arbitrarily, age 26.

Reasonable wishes for something called paradise, no?

The problem comes when you consider two people in heaven. For the sake of argument, you and that loving father.

You want him there at age 44 when he told you how proud he was, but he has his own desires and plans for heaven. He wants to be 29 again. Your loving father wants to be 29 again, because he wants to return to that day when he first brought you home.

And in continuing with your father's version of heaven, you would be age 0, all of four days old. He wants to go back to that day when he set you down in the crib he had prepared for you and see precious little you sleeping.

So how does heaven actually play out? Is your dad going to be your ideal 44 years old or his 29?

Although, you think it's sweet about your dad's version of heaven. Are you really willing to become a four day old baby for all of eternity?

For him to have his heaven, you've got to endure eternity with almost no motor skills and no control of your bowel movements.

In order for you to get your heaven, your making him become a 44 year old who has become all too familiar with the stress of mortgages and the pain of divorce.

So what age are you in heaven? Do you have to sacrifice your heaven to give someone you love theirs?

Maybe you think the solution to this divine problem is that everybody has their own heaven. Your dad gets his where he's 29 and you're 4 days old. And you get to have your own heaven, where you're, say, 25, and your dad is 44.

Do these two dads coexist? Is there simultaneously a 29 year old dad and a 44 year old dad?

Which one is your real father?

If you say, only one of them is real, then, what is the non-real one? Is he just a figment of his own imagination, perhaps just a detailed simulated version of the person you know as dad? What makes one of them really your father and the other one not?

If you say, they're both real, does your father's 29 ideal self have knowledge of what his 44 year old self is doing in your heaven?

Now, let's test out another case of heaven. One where the problem is even clearer.

There's a man named Guy and a woman named Gal. Once, Guy and Gal got married. But alas, things happened to end the relationship.

Along the way, Gal found out she absolutely could not stand Guy. He didn't shower enough and provided lackluster sex. For Gal, this marriage was a low point in her life, a regrettable period she chalked up as a learning experience. Gal went on to get remarried to the man of her dreams.

Incidentally, Gal's second husband was named Dude.

The divorce was good for Gal. It led her to true happiness. But for Guy, the divorce was the start of his spiral down the drain. Guy became an alcoholic after the divorce and never did get Gal out of his head. He loved her and did so for the rest of his pathetic intoxicated stupor of a life. Guy had been genuinely happy in the marriage and looked back on his time with Gal as the best days of his life.

So, as with everyone you know, Gal and Guy both die. Both make it to heaven. (Guy repented for his alcoholism in his last year on Earth and got sober, found God.)

Gal's heaven has her hanging out in the clouds with Dude, her one true love. In fact, Gal wants there to be no memory of Guy whatsoever. Guy would bother Gal and Dude with late night calls to their house. He was drunk and would beg for Gal to come back.

Guy, on the other hand, has a different heaven. He wants the highlight of his life back. In his heaven, Guy and Gal are happily married forever.

This would be more or less hell for Gal.

Is Gal forced to be Guy's wife again in eternity or does Guy simply lose? What kind of heaven is that where Guy doesn't get back the one thing he misses most? What kind of heaven is it where Gal can't simply forget the one thing she regrets most?

Breakdown in Aisle 4

A day passed before Violet lost her calm. I was ironing a dress shirt for an interview—Lydia and I had both gotten call backs from the grocery store—when the phone rang. It was Violet's number.

"Hey, good looking," I answered.

"Hi, Chance." I didn't place the voice at first. "Wrong girl. This is Violet's mom."

"Oh," I said. "Well, you're, uhh, good looking too."

It sort of just came out. Not my best performance. It didn't stop there though.

"I mean, your daughter is obviously beautiful and she had to get those genes from somewhere."

Shoveling myself further into the hole. Thankfully, Mrs. Bennington let me off the hook.

“Listen, Chance. Violet is really upset—”

Did her mom know about the pregnancy?

“She won’t talk to me. I think she might be worrying about college. Can you come over?”

Bullet dodged.

When I got over, Violet’s mom and dad were sitting at the kitchen table, having tea. They did that a lot: drank tea that is. It was their time to catch up and talk. It was sweet the way they got excited about tea time.

A syrupy silence was in the room though. You could tell they hadn’t been talking. They just nodded at me and then looked down the hall to Violet’s door.

I entered quietly, not opening the door more than I needed to slip in and shut the door behind me. Violet was sitting on the edge on her bed.

She was holding a white cardboard box in her hands.

I sat down next to her. It might sound odd but for a few moments the silence seemed impenetrable, like it’d go on forever.

She said without turning her head, “Thanks for coming over.”

“No problem.”

Violet’s room was near as it always was. Everything in its place. No matter how busy the day was going to be she’d spend ten minutes each morning making the bed and picking up. Against the wall were a few shopping bags and on her lap was a white box.

“What do you got there?” I said, sensing she was slowly coming out of her shell.

She looked down at the box. There was a lack of recognition in her eyes like she had forgotten it was there.

“It’s a desk lamp.”

“Cool.” I said, letting the word linger so much that I didn’t have to ask the obvious why.

She leaned over and hugged me. Her back felt fragile like it papier-mâché that hadn’t dried yet, a weak slump in her muscles after crying for too long. It turned my stomach to see her like this.

Maybe Hell isn’t all the fire and brimstone shit you hear about, maybe you have to sit there and watch the people you love cry for the rest of days.

After a long while, she let go of me and held up the box.

“My mom took me to the store today,” she said, examining the box. “I tried not to go but she was not having it. She was too excited about it. She had already gone to the bank to take out the money.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.”

She gave me a look that wasn’t anger but it was certainly not agreement. I noticed the stuffed toy koala on top of her dresser.

A memento of our first date.

“Every other time it’d be the other way around. I’d be begging for her to take me to the store. I told her that I was tired. I told her I was too busy with PURE work to go. She looked like a kid on Christmas, though. So I finally gave in.”

“Why didn’t you want to go shopping?” A self evident question for Violet.

“She was taking me to the store to buy stuff for my dorm.”

“Oh, Jesus.”

“I’m going to be such a disappointment.”

I tried to object, “Vi—”

She kept going. I piped down.

“We got there and she kept going on about how her parents couldn’t even have fathomed going to a university. My grandfather didn’t finish high school. She kept going on and on about how impressed they would have been. About a hundred and twenty times before we even got to the store, she told me she was proud of me. She tried to light a cigarette but she was too excited to light the damn thing. It was the longest I’d been around her without her smoking in I don’t know how long.”

Daisy not smoking for any amount of time would normally be occasion for handstands and champagne corks flying in Violet’s book.

“I was following her frantic pace up and down the aisles. She was too excited to notice my apprehension. She would pick up an item from the shelf and pretend like she was actually weighing the decision to buy whatever it was. Then she’d say something like, ‘Oh, you could use this for...’ and toss it into the cart. I’d pretty sure she didn’t put anything back on the shelf. She had put two coffeemakers in there.”

With everything so spotless as Violet’s room usually is, the overflowing trash was way out of place. Why hadn’t she thrown the bag out earlier?

“The at home pregnancy test kept flashing in my mind. My mom, if she was so damn happy about everything, I think I could have made it through the shopping. And it’s not like I could tell her, ‘Hey, you’re daughter’s a fuckup. Sorry to burst your bubble ma’am but the first person in your family with an opportunity to go to college got herself knocked up.’”

Violet used clear plastic trash bags for her waste bin. There was a small outdoor trash can their family used and I realized she hadn’t emptied the basket because she was trying to hide the pregnancy test from her Dad when he took the garbage to the street.

“Finally, she picked this up,” Violet said, holding up the desk lamp. “For some reason, she was particularly excited about this lamp. She kept on about it, ‘Look, Violet. It’s got pen holders at the bottom and a flexible neck so you can adjust it perfectly to whatever you’re reading. I can just see you now: with your little textbook and notebook scribbling down your big plans for the world. My little Violet going off to college taking over the world. Yes, this lamp is the exact one that’s going to help my daughter change the world.’”

“When she handed me the desk lamp and I lost it,” she said. “Fucking lamp.” And she tossed it against the wall, tears streaming out her eyes again.

Contraception and You

Pamphlets, pamphlets everywhere you looked: at the receptionist’s counter, among the magazines on the coffee table in the middle of the waiting room, and coming out of your ears.

Violet and I had just gotten out of our schools about an hour before and rushed to our 4 o’clock appointment at the clinic.

“The doctor will be right with you.”

I looked at all the glossy trifolded papers with titles like *The Truth about STDs* and *Dealing with Your Pregnancy?* and *Sex: Myth and Reality*. The titles were endless.

I thought briefly that we might not need to see the doctor. Maybe if we just scoured the pamphlets and made detail notes of their contents, we’d stumble across the answer. A neglected pamphlet hidden somewhere in the disorganized pile waiting for us to find it and we’d open it up and it would say clear as day:

VIOLET AND CHANCE, YOU TWO SHOULD _____.

And we'd do that sort of unnecessary groan Al made when he figured out a pre-calculus test problem, a half groaned "Ah-ha." I'd walk right up to the receptionist and tell her our appointment with the good doctor was no longer needed. Violet would reassure the confused receptionist by holding up the pamphlet in her left hand and flicking its corner with her right to say, "We've got it. It's all right here."

They don't make pamphlets like that though. To be honest, I did not end up searching through them, but I'm fairly certain they don't make any tailored for each couple.

"I'm going to need you to fill out this paperwork and bring it back up to me. After that, the doctor will see you."

Violet and I sat down. We picked up the ballpoint pens dangling off the clipboards and began to fill in our insurance information.

"Is this my policy number?" Violet said, holding out her insurance card.

I studied it for a moment.

"I think so."

The noise of scribbling continued.

"Am I allergic to medication?" I said.

"Are you?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm asking."

Violet looked at me, up and down, as if that would give her the answer.

"I don't think so. You'd probably know if that was the case."

"Well, what if I'm deadly allergic to penicillin or something they give me?"

"They're not going to give you anything," she said. "I'm pretty sure they're only going to look at me."

"True."

We kept on filling out the forms and the sporadic questions continued until she looked at me and said, "I've never filled one of these out before. Have you?"

"No."

"My parents always did it."

"Same here. My mom always did these."

She shook her head and smiled. For a moment, it was undecided whether she'd burst into tears or laughter. Thankfully, she laughed.

"We have no clue," she said, catching her breath. "Not the slightest clue."

After we turned the forms back into the receptionist—which were no doubt riddled with incorrect information—we sat back down and waited.

More than half the seats in the room were filled but if you shut your eyes, you'd think the place was empty. Nobody made a peep. Surely, everyone had a lot in common, but it wasn't the type of place where you struck up casual conversation.

The girl sitting across from us couldn't have been more than 15. The seat on her right and her left were notably empty. Her eyes darted around the room but never at an angle where eye contact could be made with anybody.

Was she here for birth control? Did she need an STD test?

In the corner was a woman in her early thirties. She had the least anxious face in the place. Comfortable with the process of abortion or here for a routine Pap smear.

A couple in their early twenties—probably college aged—on the other side of the room. They were holding each other's hand but staring blankly and not saying a thing. Trying to get pregnant? Trying to get rid of a pregnancy?

I wasn't the only one looking around. Despite the worry and reason for us being in that particular waiting room, we fell back into our natural behavior momentarily and were people watching.

Violet leaned over and whispered, "What do you think all their stories are?"

I only shrugged my shoulders.

God only knows.

I couldn't help myself so I picked up a pamphlet that had stuck out to me: *Contraception and You*.

"You're a little late on that," Violet said looking at me.

I read a few more as Violet occasionally reported what she saw as significant mannerisms giving clues into the other waiting room occupants' stories.

Don't Be Like Al

So I know I've skirted the issue until this point. But now's as good a time as any.

Yes, Violet and I used contraception.

I think we took all the reasonable measures. Before we went to Funkytown, Violet went to the doctor and got herself on the pill. She told her mother her periods were irregular and that she was looking for it to help clear her skin, both things that the medication could fix with the not so minor consequence of birth control.

And in my handy dandy little pamphlet tells me that out of every 100 women who take birth control and are sexually active 8 will become pregnant if they do not always take the pill as directed (missed pills).

I can vouch to you, cross my heart and hope to die, that Violet took her pill as regularly as the Pope says his prayers before bedtime. She had an alarm clock setting on her cell phone go off at 4 PM sharp.

Which put her in the next category discussed in *Contraception and You*: woman who **always** takes the pill each day as directed. 1 out of every 100 women will get pregnant each year if they use this form of contraception.

From this, you might be inclined to say, 'Big whoop.' One out of a hundred is hardly worth raising an eye brow.

But that's not it.

Us being both virgins going into our relationship, we took more measures to try and ensure pregnancy wouldn't happen. The joke was on us. However, you should be made aware that we did not just use birth control.

I wore a condom every time.

And I mean it, every single time. No *Let's just see how it feels*, no *Only for little bits*. I was also super careful in my storage and usage. I know I'm a 17 year old kid who was sitting in a clinic without a clue in the world what to do with his pregnant girlfriend, but the importance of this cannot be stressed enough: storage is important.

Don't let me see you open up your wallet at the fast food drive-in and there lies a crumpled up condom. The crack and the creases in the wrapper making it look like shedded snake skin.

Don't leave your condoms in the glove box on a hot summer days. The temperature rises, latex gets distorted and then you're sitting right where I was, in the clinic, might I remind you, scared shitless.

Don't be like Al. In other word, don't end up like me.

The Impossibility of Telling George Washington to Put On A Heavier Coat When He Goes Out

Speaking of Al, Coach Maynard had returned to wrestling practice after his two day mandatory sensitivity training. Al and I were in study hall when he told me this.

Al's head was lying on a desk when I came into the room. His eyes were vacant.

"What's the matter with you?" I asked.

"Exhausted," he said. "Maynard is back and he's fucking pissed at me. You'd think I fucked his daughter and wife in front of him."

When they dated and found themselves bored, Al and Lydia probably competed over who could say the sickest joke.

"Did you?"

"Not recently," Al said. He smiled, showing he was tired only and no emotional trauma was going down. "Somebody ratted him out to the principal or the school board. Told them about how he was calling his athletes queers."

"Good," I said.

Asshole deserved what he got.

"Was it you?" Al asked.

There was no accusation in his tone. More like the mom trying to keep something the kids have done from dad who has blood pressure through the roof.

"No. Honest."

I want to have a beer with whoever did though.

"Whether you did or not," Al said, "he thinks it was you and therefore he's concentrating his anger on me." I'd of thought he was trying to be sarcastic and angry if he hadn't yawned and laid back against the trunk of his car as he said it. "Practice has been two or three times harder than usual. He's running everyone ragged, and like I said, he's got his focus on me."

Al pulled out the green bottle, spit into it. Trying to make weight again.

"He kept me after practice," Al continued. "Thought he was going to chew me out. He didn't though. He had me practice defending this rare ancient arm bar. I've never seen anybody use this thing. It's like a relic of Greco-Roman wrestling or something. And I kept defending against it. Honestly, I was only getting it about half of the time. Maynard doesn't say anything to me besides, 'Again,' and we're still there practicing the same fucking move over and over."

Al stopped to make a light growl, collecting spit in the back of his mouth again and added more saliva to the green bottle.

"So what's Maynard's deal?" I said. "Is he trying to get in your head or something?"

"Finally after an hour of that shit, I say, 'Coach, who the fuck cares whether I can do this or not, nobody uses that arm bar anymore.' I might not have even the sentence now that I think

about it, but he starts shouting now, yelling, ‘That is how giants fall. You ever hear of George Washington?’

“And I’m, like, of course, who hasn’t heard of George Washington. Maynard keeps on going, ‘This man had bullet holes in his coat after a battle in the French-Indian War. Two fucking horses shot dead right out from under him. Not to mention all the dangerous places he survived in a little thing called the Revolutionary War. You know how one of the baddest motherfuckers in all of history died?’”

Another hawking noise from Al, another deposit in the green bottle.

“I tell him I don’t know how Washington died. I’m not much for history. Maynard goes, ‘He died of pneumonia. What a faggy—I mean, bitch way for one of the most famous military generals ever to go out?’”

For those of you playing at home, I looked into this after Al told me this story. Washington did get pneumonia and now modern doctors think he didn’t necessarily die of pneumonia but his treatment. His doctors put leaches on him—standard procedure at the time—and having them suck out blood. The lack of blood caused the dehydration and asphyxiation because there weren’t enough blood cells to carry the oxygen to his body parts.

You can’t make this stuff up. Regardless, pneumonia or leaches isn’t the sexiest way to make your exit.

The proper use of a condom as the only form of birth control will cause 2 in 100 women to get pregnant within a year.

Violet’s regular birth control and my properly used condoms: do the math.

I’ll save you the scrap paper and the effort. For our method, the odds of a woman getting pregnant are 1 in 5,000 each year.

The odds get worse when you factor in that Violet and I only started taking trips to Funkytown five months ago.

“I don’t get it,” I said to Al in study hall. “What is the whole history lesson for?”

He put the bottle away. He seemed to believe he was out of saliva. “He went on to explain it. His point was that George Washington was looking for enemy soldiers and bullets flying past his face. He wasn’t worried about something he considered insignificant like catching pneumonia. How is somebody going to tell this war hero to put on a heavy coat before he goes out riding?”

“Okay,” I said, “but still, what’s George Washington have to do with you practicing that arm bar?”

“His point is what gets you is not usually what you think is going to get you. He wanted me to be prepared for this special arm bar even if it wasn’t likely to happen. Then, Maynard told me this was the move that got him when he was in high school wrestling for State’s. Maynard used to be incredibly good. I looked at his record. This guy he was facing was a huge underdog and the guy busts out this exotic arm bar and Coach is shit out of luck.”

Who is going to tell George Washington to watch out for pneumonia and beware of doctors?

Didn’t Violet and I take the necessary precautions?

Yet that heavy overcoat was the difference between life and death for poor Georgie.

Hello, my name is Chance. I’m one in five thousand. Nice to meet you.

It doesn’t always happen, but sometimes that never going to happen, statistically

impossible, shot in the dark—well, sometimes that son of a bitch actually lands. And let me assure you, it will hit you square in the jaw when you're not looking, which, for obvious reasons, you're probably not.

Violet and I sat in the clinic. We went in being the one in five thousand and came out with new odds.

Think of three women in your life. Any three, doesn't matter.

Got them in mind?

Now, statistically, one of those three women will have an abortion by the time they reach age 45.

Would my Violet be that one?

Decisions, Decisions

I wouldn't have admitted it at the time and don't go blabbing this to everyone, but the whole time Violet and I were making the decision about the pregnancy I was, so to speak, keeping my ear to the ground.

Or rather to the sky.

I was looking for a sign. I didn't suddenly believe in God, but I figured if God was ever going to say something to me, now might be a good time to drop me a line.

I found myself staring at clouds, spending more time than anyone should trying to analyze my horoscope in the newspaper—I wasn't convinced I was having a four and five star days like they claimed. I kept insisting that my mom get us Chinese takeout, so I could rifle labor over fortune cookie messages trying to decipher their answer.

Oh the sixth day of general tso's chicken and shrimp fried rice, Robin declared she couldn't take it anymore.

Lydia and I ended up both getting jobs at the grocery store. It seemed like a steady way to make money. Not exactly showers of money, but they gave 20 hours a week to start out and a promise to increase those hours up to 30 if my cashier team leader gave me a good first month evaluation.

Most of the things at the grocery store were relatively straight forward: stocking, being friendly to customers and setting up displays for sale.

The hardest part of the gig was memorizing the PLU codes. They're those tiny stickers on each one of your apples and every one of your tomatoes. PLU stands for Price Look-Up codes. As a cashier, I enter this PLU code—always 4 numbers—into the register, and then either weigh the bag of grapes or type in the number of apples a customer is going to purchase.

This is hardly rocket science but there are well over a thousand codes to learn. We have a stack of laminated pages with a metal ring through the holes punches in the upper-right hand corner of the pages, holding them all together.

This forming—(what else?)—a packet.

The answers seem to always be hidden in these stupid things.

Now, most customers will be patient if you need to take a second to look up a not so common Hungarian Wax Pepper.

Which I happen to know is 4692.

But for some of those coming through the checkout line, there is nothing more golden as their own time and convenience. These types will not be so easygoing about your fumbling with your handy dandy packet, especially for the more typical items like large McIntosh apples.

4154.

“Seriously, buddy? I need to get home. I’ve got kids to feed.”

“C’mon. Time is money.”

“What is it amateur hour here?”

Lydia and I took our training packets. They called them manuals, but I knew better. I know a packet when I see one.

We took our training packets to the park to quiz each other on PLU codes and sat on a bench overlooking the quaint lake.

“Still worried the Universe is dying?” Lydia said, sipping her orange juice.

“Other things seem to be more important for the time being.”

“See,” she said. “That’s the standard reaction after a couple of days with this information. Once it digests, you still know it’s out there, but it’s really far down the line and it seems like there isn’t much you can do about it anyway. It’s a lot like your own death actually.”

“Wait. What?” My eloquent response.

“It’s no big secret that we are all going to die. You, me, that cute old couple on the other bench, and that baby being changed by her mother over there,” Lydia said, pointing at each example as she listened to them off. “But people still go into work. They still watch too much television. I mean you’ll still have your overly intellectualizing college freshmen who come home from their introductory Philosophy course and have metaphysics-induced crises.”

(Yeah, that is the correct spelling for the plural form of crisis. Who knew?)

“Eventual demise,” Lydia continued, “comes to us all, but most of us still choose to do something constructive in the meantime. Most choose to focus their energy on the stuff that seems to matter even though when you learn the Universe is done for, it feels like you’ve just discovered something you should be knocking on doors to tell about, shouting from the hilltops for everybody to stop their days and listen up.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. Lydia looked over, waiting for an explanation.

“I’m not trying to take this conversation in to Pervertville,” I said. In fact, I recommend you try to start more of your own sentences like this. “But it sounds like when I had my first orgasm.”

“There’s a male perspective for you,” she said, chuckling.

“The what?”

“I mention life and death and the end of the Universe,” she said, “yet somehow it all comes back to sex.”

“Well, not quite sex.”

“Huh?”

“I had my first orgasm but it was—how do you say—a solo venture.”

Lydia let out a hearty laugh. I could see us as adults just then: probably neighbors sharing a beer at a barbeque.

“Continue,” she said after catching her breath again.

“The first time I figured out what everything was doing down there,” I said, “I came out of the bathroom thinking I had discovered a big biological secret. Surely, nobody else knew what I had found out. Why would people still bother going into work if they could stay home and do this?”

“Oh, Jesus.”

I focused my sight on the couple pushing a baby stroller.

Did their smiles mean Violet and I should keep the child? Or should the fact they had on designer clothes and expensive sunglasses have been a signal that money was a key component of raising a baby?

“Turns out, everybody already knew this. Almost everybody: Marcus and Kevin asked me for instructional sketches.”

“That story should surprise me more than it does.” Lydia said opened up her packet. “Let’s get to studying.”

I nodded but kept trying to see some sign God might be sending.

The elderly man giving his dog way too much attention—the thing had on its own argyle sweater as he carried it. If we didn’t have a kid now, would I become this sad soul doting on my pet with the love I could have given to a child. The poor sap was started talking to his pug in baby talk.

For the record, there’s nothing fucking dumber than baby talk. Grown, respectable adults with meaningful job titles and fulfilling lives start blabbering like morons when they’re around an infant.

And it’s not like their suddenly speaking the language of babies: all these dumbasses do is put some cutesy-wootsey spin on real words. It’s not like the diaper wearing children are suddenly like, ‘Oh wow, this lady knows the lingo. She gets me.’

It’d known that children mimic things too, like speech, so don’t be surprised when Little Timmy tells his driving instructor: “Do you want me to turn on the car-y wary with the keysie weezie?”

Like I said, I didn’t believe God existed but I was hoping to be proven otherwise. People turn to the Almighty in times of hardship and I was fairly certain my predicament qualified as such. If there was a Creator, then I should have made it on his daily itinerary—some quick instance of guidance from God on its way.

I hoped the letter was in the mail.

“Crab apple,” I said.

“4-1,” she said, straining, “0-7.”

“Bingo.”

Lydia gave herself a small fist pump of congratulations.

“Let’s see,” she said, flipping through the pages. “How about asparagus?”

“3-3-9— Wait a second. What color?”

“Purple.”

“3-3-9-4.”

“Very nice.”

I gave a half bow while still sitting to an imaginary audience.

“Give me a tougher one. More obscure.” She kept talking as I searched for exotic food items. “How’s Al been?”

It must be a natural tendency to become interested in what we don’t agree with?

“Lydia, all three of us go to the same school.”

“He doesn’t talk to me anymore. Won’t take his headphones off if I’m in study hall with him, pretends he doesn’t see me in the halls.”

I tried to say something helpful, thinking aloud that this might be what Al felt he needed to do to get past the breakup.

“Still sucks,” she said. “Is he doing all right otherwise?”

“As far as I can tell,” I said. “He’s getting obsessive about wrestling. Maynard think he could make State’s this year.”

“Wow. Could you tell him I’m cheering him on?”

An uncomfortable request I reluctantly obliged to.

“Actually,” she said. “Don’t.” Before I could object, she kept right on going, “Quiz me. Make it a good one.”

“Japanese persimmon.”

Lydia stroked her chin, pondering rare produce and its elusive PLU number.

“I’m not totally sure about this,” she said. “But 4-4-6-9?”

“Womp, womp,” I said, drawing out the womps. “So close but so far away. The answer we were looking for is 4-4-2-9. You think you two will ever be friends again?”

“Did you know,” she said, pretending she hadn’t heard the question, “the Central Intelligence Agency used prostitutes to give unknowing citizens LSD and then observe them?”

This is when I started to learn how Lydia used these obviously absurd conspiracies theories. Before, it had seemed like only a hobby of hers. But now she was starting to use them to go off on tangents when she didn’t want to talk about something.

Instead of dealing with the shitty realities of the real world, she was focusing on these farfetched tales of government cover-ups. They were her defense against the truth, particularly the pesky truth she didn’t care to deal with.

Was this foolish? Was it smart?

It was my turn to ignore a question.

“Give me another PLU code,” I said. “A tough one.”

“Chinese okra.”

For the record, our store doesn’t even carry Chinese okra.

“Hmmm. 4-6-5-2.”

Lydia rolled her eyes playfully. “Fail. 4-6-5-6.”

I began feeling stupid about looking out for a message from God. Something I consider to be figment of my imagination. I felt pathetic for being so desperate for a sign. Dumb and vulnerable to make connections that weren’t there to make myself to feel surer about the biggest decision of my life.

Isn’t that a big part of the attraction of people to religion? Something smarter than you, infinitely more powerful than you is out there who you can pray to for advice. Praying for guidance is just running things past God to help make your decision.

The full responsibility of my choice was a horrifying idea. It wasn’t just my life it would change permanently. My choice would alter Violet’s life. Not to mention, her family, my mom, and most obviously, the potential baby.

A Mama’s Boy

Lydia couldn’t take the silent treatment that Al was giving her when he did show up to lunch so she moved to another table. What Al was doing was harsh but not unreasonable. Al was sticking to his principles. He told me he didn’t want to yell and get angry at Lydia, and he knew the only way to stop himself from doing that was to cease conversation.

I admired his control.

As previously mentioned, breakups do crazy shit to people.

It's made a perfectly otherwise reasonable guy I know put his fist through his own windshield. It's made intelligent girls I know with tons of things going for them into babbling train wrecks who can't carry a conversation without it going back to how evil their ex is.

Example:

Me: *Hey Kathy. Could I borrow a pencil?*

Kathy: *Of course, Chance. [Searches backpack and hands over pencil.] You're sweet for asking me and not that slut Jessica Turner.*

Me [knowing Jessica Turner is the girl Kathy was dumper for]: *Yeah...thanks.*

Kathy: *You know Vince cheated on me with that whore?*

Me: *Yeah, I did hear about that.*

Kathy: *It's all right he had a small penis.*

Me: *[awkward silence]*

Kathy: *Didn't get me off. Not once.*

Me: *I'm, uhhh, sorry to hear.*

Kathy: *It's all right. I don't care. Really I don't. I could care less what that asshole and that tramp do.*

Me [turning around and trying not to run]: *Thanks again for the pencil.*

Kathy [practically shouting down the hallway]: *No problem. Really I don't care about those backstabbers.*

Al was drinking his skim milk but didn't touch a thing on his plate. His right leg was bouncing as it always was, something which I had become accustomed to.

His cheese quesadillas were looking exquisite and lonely.

"You going to finish that?" I said.

"Help yourself," he said, pushing his plate closer to me.

"Thanks," I said. "Congratulations on your match yesterday. Heard you picked the kid apart."

"He was nothing. Kid had no sense of balance. Impatient."

I was disappointed. The quesadilla looked better than it tasted.

I asked Al if he'd gotten any new history lessons from Coach Maynard that I should know about.

"You know Hitler was a pansy growing up?"

I didn't.

"Coach was trying to get us to project our anger towards others on our opponents. To imagine the other guys as the worst people we could possibly think of. He said he used to use Hitler as his projection figure. Kyle asked, 'Why Hitler?' which I thought was odd because I thought it wasn't the toughest riddle to figure out. Coach went on and on with this laundry list of stuff about Hitler. Said he was a pansy, a no good art school reject, who was a ridiculous mama's boy. Coach told us how you'd think Hitler had some kind of fucked up childhood for all those sick thoughts he came up with, but no. Adolf had a good childhood with a great mother and still he still went off into the deep end of depravity."

"A mama's boy?"

Al spat noisily into his green bottle.

"As big as they come."

A Good Kid

I came home to find my mom had fallen asleep watching one of her shows. *Judge Trudy*, I think. When I walked in to find her on the couch, the local evening news was on.

I am sorry to report there was a kid about my age who lives in Dayton, Ohio, a few hours from here. The kid was pissed because he thought his girlfriend had cheated on him with his friend. So this kid gets a gun, they hadn't found it yet, and shoots his friend in the head and his girlfriend in the chest.

Of course, the news trucks flocked to the kid's house after he's arrested. And the grieving parents come out, looking like deer in headlights, clearly blindsided by the whole thing.

Poor Mrs. Lazenby staring into the camera, begging you to answer the question she's going to ask herself for the rest of her life.

Her tear-soaked, mascara-running eyes practically screaming at you: "Why??"

Mr. Lazenby couldn't talk on camera, too broken up, and who can blame him. I remembered noticing how stoic he looked, despite looking down the whole segment, but standing firm with his hand on his wife's back.

Then, Mrs. Lazenby started actually speaking:

"I can't believe Scott did this. He's a good kid. We tried to raise him with love and affection. He was always into sports. He's a good kid. We taught him values. I love my son. I'm so, so sorry for Nichole and Patrick's families. Our boy is a good kid, though. He helped raise money for his school's band program, practically went to every door in our town twice pestering everybody for money. He's a good kid."

She was looking at the on-scene reporter with desperation. Mrs. Lazenby just wanted so badly for somebody to say her child—on his way to a pretty open and shut double homicide conviction—was a good kid.

This became another fear. What if Violet and I raised this child with all our possible love and attention and he or she turned out to be a serial killer?

I could list a ton of worthless, lazy assholes at my high school that had two great parents at home.

Al's tidbit about Hitler's loving mother drove the point home.

Don't get me wrong: I owe the world to my mother for sacrificing and being a great parent, but you watch the local news or learn a little history and you can see good parents don't always mean good kids.

For Christ's sake, Adolf Hitler had a strong and loving bond with his mother but turned into the King of Genocide.

How do you guard against that? You try to be the best parent and teach your child love and they end up becoming the leader of the Nazi party throwing millions of innocent Jews in death camps?

I didn't actually dream about it, but I thought of nightmares of the future. I could see Violet and me talking to some overly tanned reporter looking like deer in headlights saying over and over:

"She was a good kid."

Why Won't God Just Flip My Light Switch?

.....

I kept telling myself: if God was going to make his presence known, I thought now was as good a time as any.

Divine advice welcomed.

But I searched in my conversations with others. I kept my eyes open for anything that might show a glimmer of God's will. Sincerely, I looked for hidden messages in my cereal which was shaped in letters of the alphabet.

One morning, I was late for school because my car couldn't start.

In the morning, I was convinced God was telling me to stay put and start a family with Violet.

Corny? Yes, the mind deteriorates quickly after your girlfriend misses her period.

In the afternoon, I was convinced God actually meant that I didn't have enough battery power to accelerate into fatherhood. (Cheap metaphors are a byproduct of desperation.)

In the evening, I decided I had simply been careless and left my lights on.

.....
Before the Oh Dears took over Marlene's speech, before we even knew that she had something called Alzheimer's, there were early changes in her behavior which gave us clues something was up.

My grandmother was a talker. She enjoyed playing cards and talking. She liked sitting on the porch and talking. She would wit and talk on the phone for hours.

The definition of a social butterfly.

Robin and Marlene talked often on the phone.

Apparently, my grandmother would tell my mother, "I'll be right back." And then Marlene would put down the phone to go grab a snack out of the fridge or some other thing that required her to put down the phone.

Nothing too odd there, right?

But Marlene started to not come back to the phone. Robin would wait for Marlene to come back and she just didn't. Sometimes Marlene would put down the phone right in the middle of a conversation and walk away.

Naturally, Robin would be surprised at this unusual rudeness. My mother would hang up and call back but the line would be busy because the phone was still off the hook.

Marlene didn't only do this with Robin. She started to do it with my aunt Cheryl, too. Cheryl lived much closer to Marlene so when Marlene would flat out exit a telephone conversation, Cheryl drove over to Marlene's and see what the hell was going on. My aunt found my grandmother watching television or doing a crossword puzzle. Cheryl was about to ask why Marlene would do such a thing when Marlene looked up and said. "Hey, I was just about to call you. How are you?"

Cheryl looked over at the phone. It would still be off the hook.

Did you ever hear the anecdote about children testing God? I never did it—which I suppose is a bit odd considering my current theological concerns.

Here's how it goes:

Some parents take their young boy to church. The young kid wonders about this God fellow he's heard people singing and preaching sermons about. He can't fall asleep thinking about this loving, powerful, all-knowing God.

And the kid is no schmuck. He's skeptical, the type who will someday be kicking the tires and grilling the car salesmen about the suspicious sounding muffler in a car dealership parking lot.

.....

This whole God business sounds a little too good to be true.

He figures out how to solve this dilemma.

He doesn't have to say it out loud: the boy knows God knows everything, even what you're thinking.

So sitting in the dark in his racecar bed, the little boy thinks, "God if you're real, switch on my light."

And the kid waits, but, alas, nothing happens. The light's still off.

Like I told you, the kid is a hard sell. He shrugs and goes to bed thinking the entire crowd at the church might as well worship the Easter Bunny.

Same kid, at age 4, walks up to his parents on Christmas Eve and says, "You don't have to pretend anymore. I saw you eating the cookies last night. I found the presents a week ago in your closet. Also, those label on the boxes are definitely your handwriting. Thanks though."

I'm not that shrewd child. But I do know exactly how the little guy felt.

Every fiber of my logical brain knew there was no God that was going to come out of the clouds and speak to me in a terrific bass voice that filled the room and tell me what I wanted to know.

God seemed to have quite a bit of involvement in Biblical days and I wondered if the recent distance weren't caused by something we all couldn't see.

Had God done what my grandmother had and simply forgotten he was on the phone with mankind? Had the Almighty gotten distracted by a crossword puzzle and forgot to communicate with the world?

There would be no heavenly guidance to tell me how to proceed through this new maze of unexpected pregnancy.

The endless consequences of my decision grew endless the more I thought about the possibility. Would I be raising the next Hitler and not even know it? Was it idiotic to think we were even possibly ready to raise a human being properly?

The weight of our decision had set the world off its orbital path. We were spiraling hopelessly into the Sun.

Moses in a Straight-Jacket

In the park with everybody who would eventually die, Lydia and I sat with the packets of PLU codes on our laps.

"Do you think," I said to Lydia, "God talks to people anymore?"

Lydia is gullible. She was also Christian. I could guess her answer on this but I wanted to prove something. I wanted to prove to her that God wasn't this great being looking over us.

More than that, I wanted to prove to myself that I was stupid for looking for a deity that didn't exist to answer the question I needed to answer.

.....
 "Well," she said. That was Lydia for you, didn't even think to wonder where my question had come from. "It is true that there is a growing distance of God in the Bible."

I had unexpectedly more proof for my side than I knew before.

"Just to make sure we're on the same page," I said, bluffing, "you know, for the sake of argument, tell me what you're referring to exactly."

"In the Old Testament, you've got God talking to a bunch of people one on one. The Lord talks directly to Adam, Cain, Abel, Moses, Job, and others. Then, you get more prophets—

the middle men between God and humans—later in the Old Testament. God stops talking to everybody and relies on these prophets more and more. Then, the New Testament comes along and you get Jesus, the ultimate prophet. (At least, according to Christians he is.) That’s what you were talking about right?”

“Obviously,” I said with conviction.

“Even though that’s what’s written down in the Bible, that’s not the total of what happened between God and mankind.”

“But that whole transition is shady. There’s room for reasonable skepticism. Lots of room. Why doesn’t God just talk to everyone? Why does the Creator of the universe start needing spokespeople?”

“God doesn’t need spokespeople. The Lord might use spokespeople, but by no means does God *need* them.”

“But you’re going from talking clearly and directly right to people to middlemen and now not even talking to people.”

“Who says that?”

“What?”

“Who says that God doesn’t talk to people anymore?”

Two women power walked past us. After what Lydia had said earlier, I had to fight to see them as people doing a ridiculous form of “exercise,” instead of two people who were dying.

“You think God still talks to people?”

“I know God talks to me. Not like I hear the voice of God but there’s other ways to communicate. There are signs if you look out for them.”

“But why the shift? Why doesn’t God *talk* to people anymore?”

“I didn’t say God didn’t talk to people anymore. You did.”

I tried to reason with Lydia.

“What if some woman came up to us right now and said God is talking to us saying that she’s hearing a voice in her head who she claims is the Almighty. Today, we know better.”

“Who’s to say that those people aren’t actually talking to God?”

“Psychiatrists.”

Lydia sighed as if this was the stupidest thing she’d heard all week.

But what’s so ridiculous about thinking the Bible’s prophets were only people with now easily diagnosable psychological disorders. I’m not trying to be offensive, I’m really not, but who’s to say that these Bible figures weren’t suffering from real mental diseases that everyone mistook for the word of God and wrote it all down.

“Chance, what makes psychology so infallible?” she said. “I can give books upon books documenting psychiatrists being wrong. Maybe we’re throwing modern day prophets into padded rooms nowadays. Maybe we’re drugging up the next Moses thinking we’re *treating* him. Besides, how are you going to explain away all those correct prophecies in the Bible by those nut jobs I call prophets?”

“I’m not a weatherman. Haven’t studied meteorology.”

“No shit,” Lydia said.

“Very funny,” I said. “The point is I could get up every morning and say, ‘It’s going to hail,’ and most times I’m going to be wrong. But I’m going to be right eventually. Nothing but a blind prediction and yet statistically it will happen every once in a while.”

Even a blind squirrel finds an acorn once in a while.

“You’re saying the Bible is full of prophets who were guessing and by luck happened to predict some of the most astounding miracles in human history?”

I pointed out how broken clocks are right twice a day. These prophets could have made countless predictions, enough that statistically a few were bound to come true.

Lydia pointed out how this wasn’t some thunderstorm that came every couple weeks.

“This is predicting the son of God coming to Earth. This is a virgin with child which is a little rarer than hail.”

Which is true, but it took hundreds of years for some of the prophets’ predictions to come true. You stretch out the time line long enough and crazy stuff starts happening. Plus, there was another factor which made the prophets look more accurate than they probably were.

“What’s that?” Lydia said.

“Editing. The ones who happened to guess the right events were kept and put into the Bible. The ones who were wrong simply weren’t mentioned and left out. I don’t even see the need for God to explain all of this.”

On the extreme end of my logic, imagine thousands of people spewing out countless predictions. If you buy enough lotto tickets, it’d be easy to hit the jackpot each week.

“I think it’s clear we’re not going to settle this today,” Lydia said.

One thing we could agree on.

“But I do know that we do need to learn these new codes, our first day is Tuesday.”

Two things.

“Santa Maria Pear.”

“3-3-7-8.”

“Look at the brains on this one.”

Eventually

Violet and I headed out of the clinic. We left with pamphlets—which I would scour that night still trying to find that definitive: Violet and Chance should do _____.—and some information to seriously consider.

The eyes of those in the waiting room were glued on us as we’d gone from the examination rooms to the exit. They were trying to get the same hint that Violet and I had tried to get earlier as we stared at the middle-aged couple and the mid-twenties blonde woman who had come out before we went in.

What had the doctor suggested?

Were we going to get the abortion or keep the child?

Did we look more relieved or more anxious than when we went in?

It reminded me of the blood drive we’d had at our high school earlier that year. Everyone waiting watching eagerly, asking questions like frenzied paparazzi to anyone leaving the gymnasium where the nurses had set up shop. The same question over and over:

“Did it hurt?”

The eyes at the clinic were silently asking a different question: “What’d they say in there?”

In the parking lot, about halfway to my car, I said, “So what’d you think?”

She opened her mouth but her cell phone started to ring before she could respond.

“Hey,” Violet said, getting into the passenger side.

It didn't take long for me to figure out who was on the other line. I couldn't make out the words, but the voice was raspy and there was a few clear bouts of long coughs.

"Calm down, Mom," Violet said. "I can't make out what you're saying."

I started the car but left it in park. Violet was squinting as she looked at me. She looked confused.

Confused, finally, something I could declare I understood.

"Are you serious?"

This was the one time when I could make out what Violet's mom was saying, "I'm so proud. Things just keep getting better."

Violet forced a smile as if her mom were right there in the car with us. The same smile Violet gave when she'd opened her Christmas present last year from me.

A gift which is not just an ugly sweat. It has since become known as *the* Ugly Sweater.

"Thanks, Mom," she said and after a short garbled noise, "Yeah, I'll be home soon."

Violet put the phone back in her purse.

"I got a scholarship," she said.

"That's great, babe," I said, squeezing her hand. "How much?"

"A full ride."

"Holy shit. That's incredible."

I hugged her. She hugged me back, but there was no real pull on her end.

"A full ride," she said. Her voice was completely void of any excitement.

"That's good news," I said. "Isn't it?"

Her look made feel stupid as I realized why this wasn't good news. The limitations we were now under were becoming more and more annoyingly obvious.

"Can we talk about the clinic?" she said.

"Yeah. Where?"

"Doesn't matter."

I drove a little way down the road before we spotted the back entrance to an empty parking lot. I parked the car and we both slid our seats back. Each of us turned and put our backs against our doors, respectively, to face one another. There was eye contact before there were words.

"Where should we start?"

"Why don't you just say what you think about what the clinic doctor said?"

"Okay." (Pause.) "You sure you want me to go first?"

"Sure. Unless you want me to go first?"

"No, I can go first. Unless you wanted to go first."

"No, just go first."

"Okay. Let me start out by saying I have not made up my mind."

"Me either."

"There's obviously a lot of information to process from the clinic. I can see a lot of benefits in the adoption route. These families are all prepared to have a kid and checked out previously by the adoption agencies. And I can totally see the good we'd be doing for the kid who's going to be raised by these certifiably good parents and for these infertile couples who just want to have a kid. What do you think?"

"Frankly, I couldn't do it. I get all that you're saying about helping these couples, but it'd just be too weird."

"Weird how?"

"It'd just be too weird having the kid out there. Even if the parents were absolutely amazing and raised our kid perfectly giving them all these benefits of a stable household with already secure parents, it'd still be *our* kid. Every time I'd be out in public and see somebody with my nose or your eyes, I'd think how it could be our kid. Think of me at forty standing in line at the grocery store behind some college kid and creepily staring them up and down not knowing if this is my child. I don't want to be sixty and still wondering if that kid at the garage fixing our car is our kid. I'm sorry. I just couldn't do it."

"No, don't be sorry. This is good. Cross adoption off the list. We're making progress towards a decision."

"Want me to go ahead?"

"Yeah."

The two options left to talk about were abortion and having a child.

"So I know that we'd be great parents. Even though Margot is crazy, I've really enjoyed working with the kids. I see the way you are with them. And they love you two. You just have that sense about you. Caring, kind, if I was going to have a kid, I'd want to do it with you."

And then the bad.

"That being said. It's clear that things are going to be uphill..."

Understatement of the year.

"It's not that I want to say money is everything, but there's so much to buy to stay afloat and be prepared. Doctors visits and diapers and a trillion other things. So to raise our baby you need a good job to pay for all that but to get a good job you need a college degree but to have the baby we won't have time to get a college degree. We haven't even graduated from high school. We might be able to go back, but that's still realistically another five years before one of us can even get the degree, which doesn't even guarantee a job, but before we even do that we'd have to into more debt. Sorry, I don't mean to be so money is everything."

"No. It's okay. I get it. Love is the basis but we do have to consider what kind of life we'd be able to give the kid. I don't want to have a kid and not be able to be in its life because we're working so hard. Don't get me wrong. I want to have kids with you—"

"Eventually."

The word came out. How long had it been lurking there?

This time the silence meant we'd found what we'd be looking for.

Violet said, "We both think we'd make great parents one day. One day. There's so much going against us right now. You should be able to go to school and go after any profession you want. And I know I have an opportunity to do a lot of good with PURE and to start my own non-profit organization eventually. My plans for college and all our work in school so far will be flushed down the toilet if we go a have kid now."

"I know," I said. "We'd miss out on a ton of stuff and no matter how much we did we would be unprepared a kid."

Did you catch that? Do you see how it went from *the* kid and *our* kid to *a* kid?

"We're not ready. But one—"

"One day, we will be ready."

It got quiet in the car. Just as I had wished for in the clinic, our answer appeared. We both knew we weren't ready to have a child. Violet had everything going for her in regards to PURE, money being thrown at her to go to college, and the potential of what she'd do with that education. I had no doubt it'd be something great.

And me?

If Violet and I were going to have the child, I would be carrying a plastic fork into a warzone. Things weren't bad for me but in no way or shape was I ready to support a child. I didn't even have a high school education. I hadn't even started visiting college campuses.

But we knew one thing for sure. We were in love. Yeah, everybody is overly eager to give you an earful of how you're too young to know such things, but I loved Violet. It wasn't puppy love. I could see us further down the river. I knew our love was real in the way we both could see us being old together.

Arthritic, grumpy as hell, but thoroughly in love.

This was the push that set the snowball into motion. We were going to make good parents but not now. There was so much we needed to do before then. I know it sounds like two kids who don't know what the hell love really is, let alone if they want to be parents. I can't explain it to you but I just knew it was real.

We would both have a child.

We'd be amazing parents. Later. We'd raise a wonderful child or two in the best possible conditions. When we were ready.

Just not now.

A Real Scary Movie

Eventually, eventually, eventually...

Right after Violet told me she was pregnant, when we didn't have the slightest clue what we were going to do, I couldn't sleep. Thousands of scenarios spun through my head until I was dizzy.

"Disoriented" only begins to describe.

It felt like the most fateful game of Pin the Tail on the Donkey. Blindfolded: yes. Spun around: certainly. Wherever Violet and I decided to pin the tail would change everything. It's scary enough making decisions about your own future, but now we were in the position to change the lives of our parents, each other, and our possible kid.

But we'd made our decision to have the abortion. There was a child to think about. Yes, Violet could put off college for a couple years. Still, her hopes of creating her own nonprofit were all but null if we kept it.

Al and Lydia both love horror movies. They used to watch them all the time when they were dating. They said there was something fun about getting scared shitless every once and a while.

"Something to shake you from the normal day in and day out," Lydia said. "Remind you you're alive."

I thought, naively, that I'd finally be able to sleep after Violet and I decided the abortion was for the best.

The zombies and haunting spirits never appealed to me, though. There was always something unrealistic in their nature. I could never get into the movies enough to scare me.

My appointment book would never have circled: *Lunch Meeting w/Mr. Serial Killer, 1:30.*

The zombies and I were forever in separate universes, never to meet, so why worry?

I spent the entire night before our next appointment at the clinic wide awake. After tossing and turning for a few hours, I turned on the TV. Sure enough, a horror movie marathon—

Blood, Guts, and Girls. I tried to watch some of it to take my mind off everything.

Incidentally, the movie was about an axe murderer. The premise was that there were some teens at a family member's ridiculously beautiful cabin which incidentally put them miles and miles from neighbors, and more importantly, miles and miles from anybody who could help should an axe murderer begin killing off the poor teenagers one by one, which just so happened.

He popped out of the shed and sliced up the blonde girl with enough cleavage showing to be visible from space. Then, Mr. Murderer busted through a bedroom door to chop up a stereotypical frat boy who didn't seem to have any shirts with sleeves.

The axe murderer didn't speak a word the entire movie. Lydia had said once that this silence quality in movie killers added to their scariness. The lack of communication made the villains' motivations unknown so there was no way to figure out what they wanted.

No way to figure out how to stop them if you don't know what started them.

But I tried to get scared. I'm not sure if it was the bad acting or the unbelievably stupid actions of the teenagers to separate in crucial points in the plot but it was impossible to get into the movie.

The reason the horror movies aren't scary is that they didn't pertain to my life. There were easy precautions I could take to prevent myself from winding up in the same position of the characters: avoid trips to secluded lake houses, don't split up from my friends when some of us go missing, and the like.

So what would make the movie scary?

To do this, the movie needed to have bad things happen to the characters that I could believe happening to myself. It would have to be something that I could worry about in my real life after I shut off the *Blood, Guts, and Girls* marathon.

You didn't need a silent murderer. You didn't need idiotic teenagers to constantly put themselves in vulnerable situations.

No, the answer was far simpler.

For me, Chance, a seventeen year old in the suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio, there needed to simply be a physician character in my own personal horror flick. As my character (wearing sleeved shirts at all times) took a stroll down the street with my girlfriend character (cleavage revealed for my eyes only), the villain doctor would pop out from behind a tree, look down at his chart, and say those most horrifying of words:

"You're pregnant."

Scary, huh?

The Sum of All Things Baby

I had my fill of the horror movie marathon. Before Violet and I made our decision, I had spent my sleepless nights searching all things baby, even did it during my breaks at the grocery store.

There are standard diapers, some with wings and others with leak guards. Formula of every shape, size and flavor with more of my favorite pamphlet style literature informing me about the nutritional benefits of formula. The powdered mixtures available in bulk variety packs in aisle 10. Another landslide of laminated and tri-folded paper telling me the hazards of formula, which almost said feeding your child formula was the equivalent of starving them.

I spent my nights totaling up the costs of these choke-proof, vitamin-enriched infant whatnots that all seemed to have a cartoon animal on the package.

When we were little and first learned how to count, a friend of mine who used to live across the street explained how numbers never ended.

Infinity. The thought seemed so impossible. Of course, we didn't even know the word, infinity, but it was my first glimpse at the concept.

Like the train tracks across town, there had to be an end to the numbers somewhere in the distance. Sure, you could look both ways at the railroad crossing—the way the driver of my elementary school bus did as the small bodies kept quiet using fear of a speeding train—and not see an end to the tracks. But I always knew the tracks didn't go on forever.

Far out of sight, but the tracks had to end somewhere.

My friend Anthony developed a habit that at first our mothers encouraged for its educational value—an encouragement they would both regret. In the morning over cereal, he would count. During car rides to youth league soccer games, he would count. And on the car ride back, muddy and stinky from his performance as goalie, he would count.

Most times, during the long stretches of boredom that often is seven year olds playing soccer, you could find Anthony leaning on a goal post and dutifully counting under his breath.

I'm not sure how he kept up this habit. But it had to have been weeks and every day over cereal I'd convince myself that this would be the day. Sooner or later, he was going to have to hit the last number.

"Today," I would say pouring the milk—some in my bowl each morning, most on the kitchen counter though. "Today is the day he runs out of numbers."

On behalf of Anthony's mom and Robin, I think I can speak for the three of us when I sadly report to you that he never did run out. There was always one more. There'd be a slight pause between digits and a tiny glimmer of hope that this was the end point: the last number.

And then, he'd crush that hope. All by simply adding one more.

The reason I tell you about Anthony and voluntarily bring up this annoying memory is this is exactly how the baby items game went:

The simple things—the wipes, the diaper rash relief ointment—had no end in sight. I would naively think my search was done. My shoulders would relax and I would lean back in the computer chair. That's it, I would think. That's absolutely everything Violet and I would possibly need for a baby.

And then strollers and car seats would come out of the far corners of my mind and my head would fall helplessly on the keyboard. Another toy, another stroller attachment.

Always one more.

My listing of the baby items served a dual purpose. With each item I found, it was either an addition of further panic or relief.

You heard me correctly: relief.

With each additional item, the total cost of the baby necessities would go a little up. The sum price of All Things Baby kept going up and up like the numbers Anthony rattled off.

And naturally, this would (most times) cause more worry. The amount of money I would need for a baby would get farther and farther away from the number in my banking account.

My job at the grocery store would bring in cash. Using my minimum wage paychecks to reconcile the gap between the number in my bank account and the baby products total seemed like trying to empty out the Pacific Ocean with a milk jug.

I didn't mention to Violet this habit of my price checking every baby related product out there every night until the sun came up. Our jobs were to take the pressure off each other as much as possible, not to add, so I kept this to myself for the time being. I knew it'd be too hard to explain the temporary relief I could achieve in this.

I mean with enough time and words, I could always explain what I was feeling to Violet. That was the beauty of our connection. But another part of me saw the selfishness required to feel the relief.

See, the trick to this thing is the more and more items you find, the more and more the total price goes up. Now, at first, your blood pressure rises right along with that growing total.

But your blood pressure is not like Anthony's counting. At least, not all the time.

Oh, my stress levels went up with the sum of All Things Baby, but there was a limit. Yes, a limit.

The anxiety and tension about the pregnancy could rise only so long as there was a way, unlikely as it may be, to realistically make the necessary money to have the child and provide for it. A person can work two, three, even four jobs.

Trust me. I saw it with my own eyes when I was little. My mother had done it.

At this very point, your heart will start jack hammering and your lungs will struggle for your breath as you sit—looking idle to the untrained eye—in front of your computer. Here, you begin to see the permanent bags forming under your eyes and taste the permanent burnt flavor on your tongue from too many cups of cheap gas station coffee, barely keeping you awake during the midnight shift of your warehouse job. You begin to feel the constant ringing of the alarm clock buzzing every morning, always at least six hours too early and welcoming you to another day of paddling frantically with every ounce of your strength and still being stuck four inches below water level.

The key to escaping the panic?

Walk away from the computer? Stop totaling up your financial demise?

No, what you do is keep your ass in that seat.

Keep on counting, my friend.

This may not work for everyone, but I shit you not, the solution to the paranoia is to keep adding one more. Think of little Anthony watching seven of his peers swarm to the soccer ball way on the other side of a field far too big for its players. My relief came by reaching that brain freezing limit of what I might possibly make with four jobs and unlikely raises and to keep discovering one more—one more pair of booties, one more rattle, one more baby monitor.

Keep on adding baby essentials until the sum of All Things Baby goes well beyond those four jobs. Mentally purchase more than you could ever hope to make working nonstop and maxing out the credit cards.

Listen. If you're able to find enough cribs and car seats to make the necessary total go well beyond any amount you could possibly make if you flat out killed yourself working until your arms fell off, then you can reach the mental safe haven I'm talking about.

Look. Here the choice is made for you. You'd be reckless and insane to think that you can work enough to be the providing parent you need to be for the new life you're fully responsible for and still have the time to make and sustain a real relationship with your kid.

Suddenly, it doesn't seem so unreasonable to pray to a God you don't believe in on the slimmest of slim odds that this powerful supernatural being finds time of day to prevent your child from becoming the next Adolf Motherfucking Hitler, your eyes and lover's smile on the propaganda films spreading hatred to the masses.

This is a Get Out Of Jail Free card: when the sum of All Things Baby money becomes more than you can ever imagine making even if you somehow showed the ridiculous effort to make it with all the breaks going your way, there still wouldn't be enough time to play with the kid and maybe prevent the next Holocaust.

The numbers don't lie. This parenting thing is impossible until you go to college and get a steady job with a comprehensive health insurance plan.

Realize: the prospect of being a father now is impossible.

Feel: relief. The decision is out of your hands. You'd be irresponsible to even consider keeping it.

The ever-increasing number is screaming the answer. It's out of your hands. Don't worry because the decision has just been made for you with each additional baby must-have that you're able to find.

Breathe easy, my friend. You're off the hook.

Enjoy this for as long as possible. It won't be long until you wonder how long you've been referring to your potential child as the nameless, sexless, lifeless pronoun of "it". Feeling like a heartless bastard is part of the gig.

Don't be surprised when you're scrambling to find more essential items to push that already unfathomable monetary amount further and further down the railroad tracks, where you can't begin to think about seeing, too far away from the real world to need any consideration.

Bask in the comfort of Infinity. Enjoy the sum of All Things Baby.

Santa Almighty/Penguins and Candy Canes

Our, that is Violet and my, *eventual* parenthood combined with my unending list of baby items took the choice out of my hands. The decision was made for me. However, I still wasn't getting much sleep. There were still sleepless hours to kill.

I put them to good use though.

I resumed my search for my dear old dad. I sent a couple inquiries to the Kent State Alumni Club. A donations director named Cindy replied:

I'm sorry to regret we do not have a current address for Charlie Laplace. Unfortunately, he has not made any donations to the university or contacted the Kent State family since graduation.

Apparently, my mother and I were not the only ones.

Sorry we could not be of much help to you. Go Flashes! Alumni Donations Collector, Cynthia Smits.

There was a post script at the bottom.

P.S. While we are not able to give out the addresses of our alumni, I can assure you that the address we have is from an apartment building only a college student could stand.

The phrase struck me, “an apartment building only a college student could stand.” It had never occurred to me before to wonder where I was conceived. My father’s shitty apartment was probably notorious for something like a leaky sink or bad electrical wiring that made the lights flicker.

Yet, there might be the scene of my beginning.

I don’t think a lot of people think of their conception. Societies across the planet have come up with their own ways of hiding the way we all must begin.

There’s the stork that drops off bundles of babies to happy couples that are so in love they are squeezing each other so hard on the couch before the stork arrives that little red hearts are being forced out and floating above the lovers.

Isn’t the importance of birthdays emphasized in part to further conceal the sex component of life?

The national holiday isn’t the day Augustine Washington and his wife Mary Ball went all the way down to Funkytown. The day we celebrate is George Washington’s Birthday when that the same Mary Ball gave birth to the original American Hero.

It is reasonable to wonder if ole Augustine hadn’t given Mary Ball the flirty eyes, would the British have won a couple of close battles in the Revolutionary War and remained the colonial rulers of what was to become the United States of America?

(I had been listening to more of Al’s explanations of Coach Maynard’s history lessons.)

Parents have successfully raised their children to believe they were the product of pure sunshine and roses, not grunts and getting busy. Perhaps the more imaginative of the children believe they were the product of intense cuddling (clothes on, both feet planted firmly on the ground at all times). Usually by middle school only a handful of children have any clear understanding of what sex is.

Child 1: *Do you know where babies come from?*

Child 2: *No.*

Child 1 [looks around, making sure nobody else is listening and whispers]: *Sex.*

Bus Driver [loudly]: *Railroad.*

[Children, including 1 and 2, put hands up in a peace sign, signifying: Be Quiet!]

Child 2 [after the train track crossing has been safely completed]: *What’s that?*

Child 1: *What’s what? What’s sex?*

Child 2: *I’ve asked everyone. Everyone in Mr. Stahl’s class and nobody knows, not even Genny.*

[The two look at each other. Genny has kissed 7 boys in Mr. Stahl’s class and stuck her tongue down an eighth’s throat, claiming it’s what they do in Paris, whatever that is. They don’t know the term yet, but she is hands down the class slut. It goes without saying between Child 1 and Child 2 that if she doesn’t know, it must be filthy.]

So vaguely educated few pass the taboo information on to peers in whispers behind the swings, in notes passed quietly on the bus.

And would you like to know how elaborate this game to keep the sex out of conception has gotten between the sheltering adults and the children?

Since the youth have been kept so exquisitely ignorant we now need Sex Education classes to explain away all the lies the poor children have been fed all their short lives. We load them up with tales of storks and cabbage patch babies, then finally give in and say the word “sex” when they’re going through the hormonal swing of puberty to try and chip away at the fantasy world in their heads that the whole adult world has been elaborately maintaining.

The results of problems with teenagers and sex should be no huge surprise to adults. Although I was not a victim of the sex misinformation campaign, go to any high school—shit, even some middle and elementary schools—and there you’ll find the victims of the Stork induced ignorance.

My proof?

The swollen bellies of teenage girls whose parents were simply too busy or too uncomfortable or too ignorant themselves to have a conversation about sex.

Sex, something which we also cover up with the euphemism of “the birds and the bees.” Does anybody have the slightest clue where that terminology comes from? I was present and alert at the time when I handed over my V-card (for those of you playing at home, that’s V for virginity), yet there were no avian creatures or honey producing insects during our lovemaking session.

There are plenty of other blatant lies parents tell their children—the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy for starters. Santa Claus is perhaps the most well known example of this phenomenon. His existence is pushed as the real deal by parents in almost all Christian homes and many non-Christian homes, like my own, that celebrate a secularized version of Christmas.

The parents tell their children about this Santa who lives at the North Pole and has a list of children that have been naughty or nice. At the North Pole, he has a bunch of elves helping him out, making presents and tending to flying reindeer. Then, this guy delivers presents to all the nice children as a reward for their good behavior and gives the naughty children coal as a punishment for their bad behavior.

Oh, and he is able to deliver these presents to all the children of the world in the span of one night. Santa, the children are told, is able to defy the laws of physics and travel around the world in a single night making stops at every home along the way.

Why?

Because he’s freaking Saint Nick.

Finding out Santa isn’t real (and I deeply apologize if I’ve spilled the beans to my dear reader) is a distinct moment of a person’s life. Almost everyone I know has a story about how they found out the news.

These stories where Santa is exposed (as a figment of imagination, not literally undressed) we tell about are all clear in our memory. They’re vibrant in our minds because of how shocking it was. And while I said it was a distinct moment in a person’s life, I am not saying that it is necessarily a devastating one.

Take for instance, Lydia.

“Ever since I was little,” she said, “I knew something didn’t add all up. My dad told me of how Santa would slide down the chimney. Just the whole idea of some fat, jolly stranger break into our house seemed dangerous. I fought with my mother for an hour one Christmas Eve trying to get her to light a fire in our fireplace. My father wouldn’t listen to my pleas to turn on our security system. But when I found out he wasn’t real, it was exciting. It was getting widespread confirmation of a massive, worldwide secret.”

It can be a tough pill to swallow, also.

“I was a big baby,” Violet said. “I told the other kids at school they were wrong. He was real. Cried my eyes out when my parents confirmed the news.”

For others, it can be a complete nonissue.

“I mean,” Al said, “who the hell cares where the presents are coming from as long as they’re coming?”

Now where can we find a similar story to Santa Claus?

Where can we find a man who lives in another far off place like the North Pole, a location completely inaccessible to the people who are being fed the story? Where can we find another being who mysteriously knows about people’s actions, whether they’ve been good or evil? Where can we find a being that has a bunch of individuals working for him to do his biddings? (These workers of a strange species and equally puzzling origin.) Where can we find a being that is said to be able to do things scientifically impossible like Santa’s flying around the world on Christmas Eve night? Where is there supposedly a man who has knowledge of who has been naughty or nice and then uses that information to properly punish or reward individuals?

Go to a sleazy motel next to a truck stop on the highway. Rent a room commonly used by prostitutes and lonely semi-truck drivers for the birds and the bees. Then, open up the drawer of the nightstand in that motel room which would disgust anybody with a black light.

(You might want to bring along a pair a rubber gloves for sanitary purposes.)

If that isn’t your style or you don’t have a pair of rubber gloves, head to a local Christian church.

Either one, doesn’t matter which, both will have the answer because both have the Holy Bible.

The North Pole or Heaven.

Angels or elves.

Coal and presents or Heaven and Hell.

Framework for Religious Intolerance

On a playground, you hear:

“Santa’s no real.”

“What are you talking about? Yes he is.”

“My mom said he’s not.”

“My mom said he is real. Your mom is stupid.”

“Don’t talk about my mom like that.”

“Or else what?”

And the small fists start flying.

Both sides get driven further into their corners. This is the point where a debate becomes more about the talking then the listening.

It goes by different names.

For those of the Jewish faith, the Milkhemet Mitzvah: Hebrew for “war by commandment.

Or Jihad in Islam: an Arabic word meaning “striving in the way of Allah.”

Christians called it the Crusades, meaning “religiously sanctioned military campaigns.”

So, dear reader, I know it's silly of me to be surprised that so much blood has been shed in the name of God.

Investigation by a Junior Detective

The idea of Santa Claus was present in my childhood, but not overly pushed. I can't remember Robin ever saying Santa was real or telling me about him. But she put in place all the clues for a miniature detective like me to put together. The hints she left pointed to the conclusion that a certain Mr. Claus was indeed real.

Once, Santa left his famous red and white hat at our place. I held on to it until the next year, left a note trying to return the missing hat, but Santa left a reply note saying I could keep it. Apparently, Mrs. Claus had made him a replacement.

Every Christmas Eve, I left out cookies for Santa and on Christmas morning they'd be half eaten. One year, my aunt suggested that I put out a plate of carrots, too. For Santa's reindeer. I did and, of course, the cookies and the carrots were half eaten the next morning.

Further proof of the authenticity of Santa and his antlered transportation.

Here, I must bring to your attention the lesser known fact that my mother hates carrots. She says she hates the texture and the taste.

I hate the things too. It wasn't always that way. I used to eat them all the time when I was younger. But I had eaten a whole bag of baby carrots before going to an amusement park, threw up orange on the tilt-a-whirl ride.

Are forever joined in my mind is the taste of carrots with the feeling of public embarrassment.

Anyways, the Christmas I put out carrots for Santa's reindeer, I was helping my mom clean up after unwrapping presents. It was our year to host Christmas. And as I was about to throw away the wrapping paper, my eyes caught a glimpse of something already in the garbage can.

Something bright orange and half eaten.

I played it cool like the spies and detectives on TV. I didn't accuse my mother of fraud and conspiracy right away. My mission was to gather more evidence. When my mother went to take a shower and change out of her pajamas, I collected the half eaten carrot and placed it in a sealed plastic sandwich/evidence bag.

The next step was to collect writing samples. Lo and behold, Santa and Robin had suspiciously similar handwriting. The same loops and angles in their letters. Both were textbook cursive, perfectly neat.

The immaculate handwriting of a schoolteacher.

My sleuth instincts told me to investigate the wrapping paper. She'd paid attention to detail to further her deception. The wrapping paper this supposed Santa used (red with candy canes) was different than the kind my mother's presents had (light blue with penguins).

I heard the shower get turned on. I had some time to investigate.

Sneaking in my mother's bedroom, I opened the closet. In the back left corner was some more evidence: two rolls of half used wrapping paper, one with penguins and one with candy canes.

The water stopped running. I grabbed both rolls of wrapping paper and made a stealthy exit.

Robin's Interrogation

Before I confronted her, I let my mother get dressed and start the cooking. In the meantime, I pretended to play with the new toys.

Details I had missed for years were starting to practically scream at me.

For instance, I was wearing the hat this Santa fellow was said to have left behind and later let me keep. From the many accounts, Mr. Claus was a big guy with a big head.

But if this were the case, surely his hat would be huge on a second grader. It fit me perfectly though.

Too perfectly.

And the hat a tag on it. If his wife had made the hat, why would she sew in a tag explaining wash instructions and 90% polyester/10% cotton description of the materials used.

Wouldn't she just tell Santa how to properly wash the hat? Wouldn't she simply tell him what she fabrics she used to make it?

I chided myself for not asking these questions earlier, allowing myself to be fooled for so long.

I berated myself for not paying attention to the tag on the hat.

MADE IN CHINA

We didn't even have a chimney for some jolly fat guy to shimmy down.

Finally, I grabbed a pen and paper and charged into the kitchen. My mom was putting the ham in the oven.

"Hey, little man," she said. "You enjoying new stuff?"

"Yes."

"I'll have to tell Santa he did a good job." She shut the oven door. She noticed what was in my hands was not toys. "What do you have there?"

"Did you leave the door unlocked last night?"

"I don't think so, honey," she said, her face turning to concerned. "Why? Was it unlocked this morning?"

"No, it was. Do we have some hidden chimney I don't know about?"

"What? No, of course not."

"Then how did he get in?"

"Santa?"

So she was going to play it dumb.

"Who else? Of course, Santa? We don't have a chimney. You said the door was locked. So how'd he get in?"

"Oh, I—" she was weaving a tale of bullshit for me. "I let him in. He knocked, but you were sound asleep so I let him in."

She gave an uncomfortable grin. My interrogation continued.

Opening up the refrigerator, I said, “How do you explain this?” I held up the plastic bag with the half eaten and spit out carrots. “These were in the garbage this morning, not in the bellies of flying reindeer.”

“I forgot to tell you, honey—You picked those out of the trash?—I forgot to tell you that the reindeer don’t like carrots either. They said to tell you thanks, but they’d rather have something else next year. I was thinking celery or—”

She was quick on her feet, so to speak, and I went to something she couldn’t explain away.

“Write the word ‘Santa,’” I said holding out the pen and paper.

Her forced smile was replaced with faint signs of worry.

“Why?”

“Please just write the word ‘Santa’ and we can all go home.”

Robin and I were already home but it was a cool phrase I’d picked up somewhere. Probably some cop movie.

“Okay, sure.”

She took the pen and slowly approached the paper. I stopped her first attempt to sign the name.

“In cursive, please,” I said, getting impatient.

The way it jerked sharply through the letters, she looked over at me, saw my stone face, sighed and wrote the name in cursive. It was as if her hand was broken. My mother normally writes light and flowing. The Santa she wrote was sloppy and barely legible.

I raised my eyebrows. She shrugged to suggest she didn’t have the slightest clue what I was referencing.

“I’ll be right back,” I said.

When I returned to the kitchen, my mom was throwing out the half-eaten carrots. Again.

“I’m sorry I snuck through your closet,” I said, holding up the two rolls of wrapping paper, “but it had to be done. You’ll notice the red paper with the candy canes is the exact same one used by Santa Clause.”

I even did air quotes with my hands when I said “Santa Claus”.

I almost demanded to see her credit card statements, which no doubt would have charges for the items Santa had given me. Robin didn’t say anything, though, so I made my closing remarks.

“Santa isn’t real is he?”

She checked the green bean casserole and stirred the mash potatoes before she finally confessed.

“There’s no real person out there named Santa Claus. That’s true. The spirit of Santa is, though.”

“He’s a ghost?”

“No, no,” she said, setting a kitchen timer. “There’s a spirit of Santa that people keep alive. The idea that good actions should be rewarded and the good will of Christmas in general.”

“But parents don’t always use it nicely like that. When I was over at Lydia’s house, her mom kept saying that if we were bad, Santa would bring us coal.”

“Not every parent uses it the right way. They use Santa as a threat for being bad.”

She glanced over at me while she chopped up broccoli for the vegetable spread.

“Why does Lydia’s mom try to scare her with Santa?”

“Lydia’s mom isn’t a bad person, Chance. She’s probably struggling to keep Lydia from acting up and thinks that Santa’s coal might get her daughter to behave better.”

“Everybody knows that Santa isn’t real?”

“Adults do,” she said, and after a pause, added, “The sane ones at least.”

“Then why does everybody tell kids he’s real? Why did you go through all that trouble to eat the cookies, leave the hat, buy two kinds of wrapping paper, and everything else?”

What my mother put up with. She had probably woken up that morning worried enough about the house being cleaned and all the food she needed to make, and here comes her kid giving her twenty questions on the morality of parents pretending Santa is real.

“There’s no one reason. Some parents use Santa to try their kids to act better like I said. I try to use it to encourage you to do good things. Also, I’m sorry you think I lied to you about something big but I just wanted to pass down that tradition. I also remember when I was a kid liking the idea of Santa. Geez, you think I was elaborate with the Santa story? Your grandmother went on top of the house one year in the middle of the night on Christmas Eve to stomp on the roof.”

She went on to tell me about my grandfather running into their room saying, “You hear that? It’s Santa’s reindeer.” The image of my grandmother, surely wearing a coat over her pajamas, stomping on the roof at four a.m. on a cold December morning is still clear in my head.

“Yeah,” I said. “I can’t wait until to tell everybody at school once we’re back from winter break.”

“Please don’t tell the other kids this, Chance.”

“Why not?”

She stroked my hair and smiled as she looked at me.

“Because it would be mean to take that away from other people. It would ruin something that brings a lot of joy to people. That clear?”

“Yes,” I said, a little bummed out I wouldn’t be able to leak the story to everybody.

Then came the sound of my grandfather’s car pulling up.

“Shoot, they’re early,” my mom said, checking the still cooking ham. “You okay, Mr. Chance?”

“Yep,” I said, before going to open the door. “Santa got me some good gifts this year.”

She smiled and we hugged. Then, I let in our guests while she finished up Christmas dinner.

Besides you, I haven’t told a soul.

Of Grunts and Silence

I got another email from Kent State University’s Cynthia Smits off line. It was from her alter ego Crazy Cindy.

Dear Chance,

I could not write this information from my work email. They monitor all our work correspondence. We are not allowed to give out contact information from our alumni for safety purposes. I am usually a stickler for rules.

However, I could not get your email out of my head. I also do not know my father. The sad irony of it is that his name is on my birth certificate. The law has been changed since, but when I was born, a parent could seal the birth certificate so the names were kept concealed. My

mother conceived me during an affair she had with a married man, which was kept quiet in those days. When she became aware he was not going to leave his wife, my biological father agreed to financially support us if my mother was to seal this documented proof that he was the father. My mother died in a car accident when I was still a little girl and never told me who my father was. I spent a great deal of time and effort trying to unseal my birth certificate but the clerk was legally unable to show me the birth certificate.

I have not told anybody besides my ex-husband and children this story. The reason I am telling you this story is because of the following.

After my millionth attempt to figure out the name of my biological father, the clerk took pity on me. He hinted that if I began to guess names, he would be able to grunt if I was on the wrong track or remain quiet if I was on the right track. I went through a list of names in my mother's old letters of men I had never known and after five grunts, I heard sweet silence. I said thank you, heard him wish me good luck and the phone hang up.

The man was potentially risking his job and legal trouble but still chose to help me. And when I saw your email, I realized it was time I returned the favor.

Believe it or not there is a North American Alumni Donation Collectors Association. We do not do much besides have a conference every year during the summer to discuss collection strategies, nothing that couldn't be sent in a newsletter but it gets us away for a week. It's a break from the perpetual phone calls with people who did nothing with their degree, are still massively in debt from their student loans and who view our donations request as adding insult to injury.

Anyways, two years ago the conference was held at the University of Toronto. We just so happened to be at the university at the same time the Prime Minister of Canada was also visiting. A few of us from the Ohio colleges went to go see the Prime Minister speak. He was in town to give an award to honor one of the University of Toronto's physics professors. I still don't know what exactly the professor discovered to earn the honor. I was never much for science. But I do remember the Prime Minister introducing the honoree and stating his academic history.

We do not have to go through the same game of grunts and silence I did years ago. Consider your earlier inquiry your guess and this email my silence.

The only reason I remember the name is because the Prime Minister had mentioned the honoree had attended Kent State for his undergraduate which got my attention. I looked up the honoree's name when I came back to work after the conference and saw that he had not donated. His last known address was in a Kent apartment building only a college student could stand.

I looked into it and he no longer works at the University of Toronto, but this should be enough information to get you to where you're going.

P.S. I'd like to clarify that I do not write Go, Flashes! at the end of every email by choice. Constant reinforcement of university sports team cheers is one of the strategies we learned to improve donations. As I'm sure you know, we are the Kent State Golden Flashes, yet our mascot is an eagle. Go figure.

P.S.S. Good luck.

Ready or Not

Before Cindy's email, I had gone through hours of dead end searches. I had inquired at construction firms with no leads. C. Laplaces in Canadian phone directories who turned out to not be my father, but Christines, Coreys, and every name you could think of except Charlie.

My search wasn't frantic though. It was a calm, patient pursuit. I had all the resolve and the rest of my life ahead of me to empty out the Pacific Ocean, smiling with each milk jug full of saltwater I poured out.

So the email didn't seem real. It was finding the needle in the haystack in another country after glancing at the haystack through a telescope for a few casual minutes.

I stared at it for a good while.

The next morning during study hall, Lydia and Al were sitting next to each, but as had become the custom, they didn't say a word.

Al had his headphones on. He looked like a strong anorexic, if that's possible. His head plopped down on the desk and his eyes shut, I'd have thought he was asleep if it weren't for his leg still bouncing, always trying to burn a few extra calories. Come to think of it, it might have been possible that he was indeed asleep but had somehow trained his leg to keep bouncing during his slumber.

Lydia occupied her time by sifting through a stack of tabloids. She was a kid in a candy store at our new job: the manager, our new boss Dave, let her take all the old tabloids for free once the new issues came in each week.

Mr. Berry had a concerned look on his face. He was grading some of our homework papers this time. His sighs told me the class didn't understand the nuances of trigonometry.

I spent study hall in the back of the room making a long distance call or two.

"University of Toronto, Physics Department," said a chipper voice. "This is Nick speaking."

"Hi, there Nick," I said, "my name is Harrison Jacobson. I'm a professor of physics here at Kent State University and in charge recruitment for the department and the university. Long story short, an old student of mine taught at your university and I was supposed to send him information about our prospective student week. Charles Laplace is his name. He was going to come and speak to the kids about his experience and all that he went on to do with his Kent State education. Anyways, I don't have his updated contact information since he left his position at your university."

"Oh, I'd be happy to help a colleague," Nick said. "I'm actually one of the faculty, but my receptionist wasn't feeling too good so I let her take the rest of the day off. I know how crazy this time of year can be with all the potential students and pressures to get a strong recruiting class."

"You're telling me. Can't wait until spring is over." I could hear his fingers typing away at a keyboard, searching the physics department database.

"We physicists have to stick together, help each other out, that's what I think. It's that unifying thing about physics that lured me to the field."

"How's that?"

"Take Professor Laplace's for example. The goal of his work is to unify, well, everything. You know?"

"Yeah," I said, not knowing what the hell we were talking about. "His work is admirable. You could tell he was going to do something big from the start."

"Laplace is certainly doing the biggest work there is," Nick said. "Like I was saying, physics is a universal language, perhaps only rivaled by math itself. But we're not trying to

compete like every other department on a college university. We're not trying to compete with each other. Our goals aren't like businesses and nations competing for limited resources."

Clearly, I wasn't the first one Nick had given this spiel to. "The unifying," he continued, "I'm speaking of deals with what connect me, a Canadian, with you, an American. We're not those meaningless distinctions of nationality. We're just physicists. We're dealing with the same problems. We're speaking the same language, working together to solve the problems God Almighty has left for us to play with. The work Mr. Laplace in doing, in the same vein I'm sure you taught him, is going to unify us all."

Nick was beginning to sound more like a religious fundamentalist than a scientist in the University of Toronto's Physics Department. But I kept my mouth shut.

I didn't mind listening through some babbling to what I needed on Charlie.

"If Mr. Laplace succeeds in finding the Grand Unified Theory, which God willing, he will, the whole thought of the cruel judiciary systems are going to have to rethink their mantra's of punishment. Nations will have to stop their wars, made instantly petty by the work of Mr. Laplace. He will eliminate the human need for constantly blaming one another. God's mysterious ways will have some more light shown on them by Laplace and the whole of humanity will start working with itself instead of against it."

Nick seemed like he was done with his portion of the conversation and expected a little agreement from myself. So I said the only thing I could think of that seemed appropriate to Nick's world view.

"Amen, brother."

"Couldn't have said it better," Nick said. "You got a pen and paper ready?"

"Yes."

"Okay, here is the info you're looking for..."

I hung up the phone.

The end of wars? Judiciary systems? How was physics going to make the whole of humanity look at itself?

What exactly were they smoking up there in Toronto's physics laboratories?

I went on one of the computer's in Mr. Berry's room and looked up the Grand Unified Theory that Nick was going on about. It seemed many scientists thought Charlie was on the verge of discovering this "holy grail" of physics. In the very near future (no one could predict exactly when but they knew he was close), Professor Charlie Laplace was expected to find the Grand Unified Theory.

I found this description:

Grand Unified Theory *n.* (*Abbr.* GUT)

A theory of elementary forces that unites the weak, strong, electromagnetic, and gravitational interactions into one field theory and views the known interactions as low-energy manifestations of a single unified interaction.

Sounded important, at least scientifically, but I hadn't the slightest clue what Nick was jabbering about with humanity taking a long look in the mirror. Probably nothing a little more sleep and less caffeine couldn't help with.

In study hall, I found myself looking out the window. It was morning and getting brighter, but nobody seemed to notice, too busy marking their incorrect math problems, reading their celebrity scandals or bouncing their leg.

It was out there, you could barely see it especially if you weren't looking hard enough: the moon. The moon is always in the sky during the days too, you just can't see it because of the brightness of the daytime. But it's out there, hiding.

And I said to it, "Ready or not. Here I come."

Operation Climax

I sat back down at my desk after the phone call. Mr. Berry was still scribbling in red pen on homework papers, Al's leg in the same perpetual bouncing motion. Nobody in the study hall noticed I had moved to the back.

Had the study hall been like this all along?

How long had everybody been going about their own stuff—schoolwork, wrestling practice, and conspiracy theories—and completely forgetting, or worse not even caring, about the person next to him or her?

When exactly did Lydia and Al start sitting together as distant strangers, not even enemies anymore, because being enemies took effort and required you to pay attention to the other person?

As I asked these questions, it became clear that they weren't the only doing the ignoring. The only reason I was asking these questions was because I was a part of this mentality. I didn't know when Al and Lydia stopped talking.

I had gotten wrapped up in my own problems, too, and forgotten about them.

Only Violet and I knew about the pregnancy. It was our secret for obvious reasons. But we had become so obsessed with hiding it from everybody that we had alienated ourselves from our friends and family.

Robin and I used to talk all the time. It was shameful that I couldn't remember the last time I spoke to her for more than a couple minutes. She would come home now and watch her shows. I came home, said hi and went up into my room before she fell asleep on the couch and I could sneak back downstairs into the computer room. This schedule was the only way to assure my mom wouldn't walk in right on me looking up baby rattles and abortion information.

"That politician Edwards is in some deep doo-doo," Lydia said, folding up her tabloid.

Thankful doesn't begin to describe the feeling I had towards this trademark Lydia-ism. The simple words broke through the barriers between us. We were going to share some information that mattered to one of us.

And instead of my normal dismissal of celebrity gossip, I wanted to know what had put that glow in Lydia's eyes so I said, "Really? What'd that bastard do?"

"Well during his run for Vice President, he got this woman working on the campaign pregnant."

"No way," I said. "Doesn't his wife almost die of cancer too?"

"Yeah," Lydia said eagerly. "It's a little fuzzy whether Mrs. Edwards' cancer was still in full force or in remission at the time. I don't get what all the worry over that is about. Either way he's an asshole."

"Can't believe it," I said.

It didn't matter if I believed it. I mean, a tabloid story is just that—a tabloid story. Some faceless writers who write celebrity gossip about scandal to sell magazines. But it was important

that I finally let go of my own preoccupation with the precarious truth written in the *National Enquirers* that Lydia read so dutifully.

I was finally listening to what Lydia cared about. I let myself get excited, if only temporarily, about the stuff that excited and mattered to her. For that moment, I didn't want to do anything else in the world except listen to my friend.

She told me more about an alleged sex tape (what vice presidential candidate would be stupid enough to make one with a mistress?) and the newborn child that was being held in the picture Lydia had shown me a couple weeks early. It was of the woman's baby and the man in it did resemble Jonathan Edwards.

But it was as blurry as you could possibly take a picture at that close of a range. You could almost be sure it was a fabricated photograph. The photo was so bad it looked like it had to be intentional to take the picture that out of focus.

Lydia told me all about the ins and outs of the story. She kept saying, "The *National Enquirer* broke this story."

Any other day I would have told her about how impossible it was for some sensationalist tabloid to be the only one to find out such a huge story. Any other day I would have pointed out that dozens of respected award-winning journalists traveling with Edwards' campaign would have certainly picked up the story well before the *National Enquirer*.

But like I said, it wasn't any other day. The truthfulness of Lydia's story was irrelevant. I was sharing a moment with my friend and her passions.

Finally, Lydia ran out of things to say. She got quiet and started to reach back to her tabloids, the ones from last week she had gotten free from our job.

"Tell me more," I said

It sounded a little more desperate than I wanted it to come out.

"That's all I can think of."

"What about that LSD government testing?"

She grinned. "You're never going to believe this shit..."

Her magazine got jammed back into her purse.

"So in the 1960s, at the height of our Cold War fears, we thought Russia and some Asian governments were using mind control techniques on our captured agents."

"God damned communists," I said.

"The Central Intelligence Agency gets wind of this. They get all panicked that the Communist powers are going to figure out how to brainwash us all out of capitalism and the free market that built Amer—"

She paused as Al let out a snore that almost shook the windows. His leg, though, still kept right on bouncing. We studied this sleeping exercise for a little before Lydia continued her tale.

"Now mind you," she said, "this is the 1960s. The counterculture movement is in full bloom across college campuses. Hippies everywhere are sharing peace signs and psychedelic drugs on the nightly news. So the boys in the CIA figure: why not experiment with LSD and test people to see if there isn't some way to figure out how to brainwash?"

"Mind control equals defending democracy?"

"Somehow," Lydia said, rolling her eyes. "The CIA buys up a bunch of brothels in San Francisco and get the prostitutes to work for them."

"Like Jonathan Edwards got that woman to *work for* him?"

She laughed at the bad joke.

“No, the prostitutes were paid to give their customers LSD. The agents sat behind these one-way mirrors in the warehouses and observed the effects of the drug.”

I had fought them, but my old tendencies and instincts came back.

“Wait a second,” I said, unable to stop myself. “You’re telling me that government secret agents paid prostitutes to give LSD to unknowing American citizens thinking they were just getting a blow job to watch them.”

“Yes.” She sat there like I had just repeated the day’s lunch special to her.

“And you’re telling me these world class spies intended to watch these strung out people in the hopes that they’d figure out a way to brainwash the enemy and win the Cold War.”

“Correct,” she said, again seemingly unmoved by the utter ridiculousness of my summary. “I haven’t even told you the good stuff yet.”

Here, I actively didn’t make a mention of the impossibility of this government agency using illegal sex workers to distribute equally illegal drugs in an effort to stop the spread of communism on the other side of the world. My mouth was shut on the absurdness of spies watching American citizens get drugged and have sex while sitting behind one-way mirrors. The overwhelming idiocy required of the CIA agents to think they would figure out the mystery of mind control by watching some idiots get fucked up off LSD was enough to make this sound like a deranged fairy tale.

Instead, I just listened to my friend’s story.

“Believe it or not,” she said, “they named it Operation Climax.”

There was no need to argue with Lydia in the same way there was no need to argue with the homeless man on the street corner wearing the cardboard sign that says everyday: THE END IS NEAR.

“The CIA even started giving it to their own guys.” Lydia added, “A government scientist, Frank Olson, was among a few that got slipped LSD in their drink. He supposedly committed suicide a couple of days later, at least, that’s the official report, but there was a head injury they found when they dug him up years later that happened before he hit the cement ten stories below his hotel room.”

I didn’t mention how it was pretty odd nobody talked about this huge conspiracy of our government drugging citizens and harmless scientists that happened fifty years before. Lydia went on and on about the so-called Operation Climax.

Still, I wanted to listen. To be honest, I could have listened to her conspiracies for days.

But what have I left out?

There was more than just friendship in my desire to hear Lydia’s conspiracies. Yes, I listened because I wanted to strip away some of the barriers that had made their way between me and my friend, but I was also becoming desperate for distraction from the appointment Violet and I had afterschool.

We were scheduled in at the clinic to talk with a doctor at five o’clock who would give Violet two pills.

I had been doing anything I could to keep my mind elsewhere: the sum of All Things Baby, renewing my search for my absentee Canadian physicist father, and listening to whatever way out there story Lydia could remember about the American government’s dark side.

Anything—yes, anything—to not think about that five o’clock appointment and those two pills.

George Washington: Grumpster Dumpster

The stalling continued after school. Al had a big meet the next morning, Regionals, so Coach Maynard gave them a free day. There was no practice, but Al and the other wrestlers had been instructed to get plenty of sleep and to eat a healthy breakfast.

Al took off his headphones when he saw Lydia leave. We closed our lockers and headed out to the student parking lot.

“Want to grab some chicken nuggets?” I said, more a rhetorical than an actual question.

“Are you kidding me?” Al said.

He looked sad in his eyes. The old Al would have jumped at my question and even added a stop for some ice cream afterwards. My question forgot about all of the hard work and training Al had been dedicating himself to.

But most of all, it illuminated how much my friend and I hadn’t been hanging out over the past weeks.

So instead of going to a drive-thru, we sat on top of Al’s trunk. We watched every car leave the lot except for ours. We shot the shit.

“How you feeling about tomorrow?” I said.

Before every match I’d seen him at, Al was usually a combination of frantic anxiousness and occasional vomiting.

“Calm, surprisingly,” he said. “I’m prepared as I can possibly be.”

I found myself envying Al’s inner peace.

“Maynard still giving out history lessons?”

Al chuckled as he nodded. “The way he talks about him nonstop, I think he wants to be George Washington.”

“Or fuck him.”

“That, too,” Al said. “I should be able to get a job as a historian by the time wrestling season is over with all I know about the first American president.”

Again, like the LSD experiments of the CIA with Lydia, the only reason I cared about George Washington is because my friend did.

“Anything interesting?” I said. “Besides chopping down the cherry tree and not being able to tell a lie.”

“The cherry tree stuff is complete bullshit.”

“Didn’t know that.” I said, feeling a bit naïve, but such is my new life.

“Nobody credible believes that story. But there’s some cool stuff I didn’t know.” Al again make that hacking noise of accumulating saliva to spit and reached for his green bottle, but realizing we were outside, just spit a monstrous looking thing into the parking lot which killed my appetite. “When Washington was general, he had a private killed for some insignificant offense. I forgot what Coach said, but it was like being late to a morning drill. Something you could see a commander punishing but not with the death penalty.”

“Really?” I said, feeling more naïve.

“Not only did old Georgie have this nobody executed, but Washington went on for a half an hour angrily yelling at the poor sap before they killed him.”

“That isn’t exactly what I think of when I hear of the Father of Our Country.”

“You’re telling me.” He started to bounce his leg but stopped himself when he saw he was shaking the car. “Anyways, how’ve you been?”

“Okay,” I said and told him about the new job, PURE, and everything except the whole abortion I was about to take my girlfriend to and the tracking down of my absentee father.

You Can’t Hide

Al and I finally parted ways an hour later. He needed to get some rest before tomorrow. I wished him luck and then took my time picking up Violet. She was in a PURE meeting and our appointment at the clinic wasn’t for another hour.

The PURE meeting was for the higher ups. It seemed to be some sort of emergency because Violet had only gotten notification about the meeting late the night before. It was being held in the gym of our local elementary school.

Thanks to Al, I had a new found appreciation for the irony of the school’s name, George Washington Elementary.

As I had been all day, I was in no rush to get over there. That might have been the first time in my life I drove under the speed limit.

Still, I got there 20 minutes early. I came close to getting fast food on the way over but then had a visual flashback of Al’s spit so I just drove straight to the school.

Even though I thought it was right to have the abortion knowing how much better Violet and I could handle a kid when we’re a little older and wiser, I didn’t care to think about it, especially without having access to my computer and the sum of All Things Baby. With the extra time I had to kill, I took a little walk around the block and made the effort to focus on everything I saw.

Observe a world that I’d been ignoring.

There was a pretty pissed off pit bull that made my acquaintance. Never had I been more thankful for the invention of chain link fences.

“Pinky, chill!” yelled the owner from an open window. The dog went completely docile, trotted back to the porch, and curled up.

Pinky?

Further up the street, an elderly man slept with an opened newspaper on his lap. People say that life is short, but why do I know so many elderly people who don’t seem to be in any rush at all?

After making a lap around the block, I ended back up at the school. Violet hadn’t gotten out yet and there were some kids playing at the playground. School had been out for a couple hours so these had to have been kids from the neighborhood. This was where Al, Lydia and I had gone to elementary school and the same playground we played on.

The kids were playing the game we used to play. Hide and Seek.

The unique thing about this playground was how the slides, monkey bars and jungle gyms were in a circle around a patch of trees. This was intentionally designed to allow kids to play in the trees. A fence was on the side nearest the parking lot and the school itself on the other, so from a spot on the far right side of this unique playground, an adult could spot any stragglers.

It was designed like this so that kids could have a mix of nature and manmade playthings while not having to risk little ones getting lost forever in the woods. But this layout should not matter to you as much as it didn’t matter to those kids playing. What did matter was this was a great place for plenty of excellent games of Hide and Seek.

If you don't believe me, go ask Al or Lydia.

"Ready or not," shouted one of the kids. She had an incredibly loud voice for so small a body. Her vocal chords had to have made up about half her size. After this warning, she started running in her search.

Of course, this reminded me of my own warning to the moon and my father, Charlie.

Only three other kids were playing with the loudest seven year old on earth. In under a minute, she found the first two boys hiding. They had chosen average hiding spots. One kid was behind the teeter-totter. The other thought nobody would see him on the top of the monkey bars.

Sheesh, kids these days.

She ran around the circular playground fast during these first two finds and made another quick lap before slowing down. I had seen where the kid she was seeking had hidden. He had climbed a tree and was standing on a thick branch.

What made this such a clever hiding spot is that there was a smaller tree below the branch he was on and a bigger busy evergreen in front of it.

After not seeing her prey the first two times around, the vocally blessed girl slowed down. She didn't seem anxious. There's no time limit in Hide and Seek so patience is a virtue of the game. She casually checked the usually places on the outside metal and plastic play stations. Once she assured her target was in the woods she made a thorough sweep of the trees. She started to look vertically once she had made her ground floor inspection. Seeing the only blind spot in the higher levels of the tree, she picked out the exact tree to climb.

A second after she made her climb, I heard a loud bellow, "You can't hide!"

She figured out the correct way to seek as I had.

I had scurried around, looking hurriedly through the employee information of Canadian construction companies, phone books, and even once, I admit, a few Hawaiian hotels guest registries, hoping to find the Laplaces on their second honeymoon.

But as I said, Hide and Seek has no time limits and in difficult finds it's advisable for the seeker to take his time. Slow and steady wins the race. Keep observant and your prey will pop up eventually.

"What?" Violet said. "They wouldn't let you play?"

She had snuck up on me.

"Said I wasn't cool enough," I said.

"Figures."

Margot's Misstep

We got into my car and talked about the latest happenings. I must say we did a pretty good job pretending we weren't on the way to get an abortion.

Pulling out of the parking lot, I asked why the emergency PURE meeting has been called.

"Get this," she said, a kid with a secret. "Everybody has been up Margot's butt ever since the ABCs of Not Smoking was implemented. Granted, it's been doing wonderful, but she's still not managing the day-to-day needs of the organization like she needs to."

"You, Kelly, and Jimmy are doing all the work."

"I don't mind working hard for anti-smoking," she said, now a professional public figure. "What I do mind is not working as smart as we could be and wasting our energy on mailing 200 envelopes to schools that have been closed for the past five years."

“Fail.”

“Big time fail.” This time, the opportunity-seeker in her was talking. “Anywho, we might finally be able to oust her. This is so stupid. There are pictures surfacing from a college party she was at. Jimmy’s ex-girlfriend, who he so warmly referred to as a slut, sent him a couple pictures to make him feel jealous about how good she looked and how much fun she was having without him—I’ve got to say the mini-skirt and the tube top Jimmy’s ex was wearing had only enough fabric for a handkerchief. But in the background of all these photographs primarily featuring this girl’s cleavage, Margot is there puffing away at some cigarettes.”

We had talked before about how Margot didn’t seem to actually care about anti-smoking as much as wanting to be in charge.

“So I’m planning a coup,” Violet said, my little conspirator ready for a hostile takeover. “They want me to be the new PURE leader.”

I didn’t question for a moment that she couldn’t do it. Although we didn’t say it, this was exactly the type of opportunity Violet could pursue when we decided to have a kid. We talked about her plans to regenerate the organization and it was really nice to see that fire in her eye again. I told her about how George Washington was a douche bag and the government was using prostitutes to hand out LSD.

As before, everything but where we were going. We spoke of everything except what we were going to do and in no time, we were at the clinic.

Poor Choices in the Wording of Medical Pamphlets

During our first trip to the clinic, Doctor Keefer had explained our options to people wanting an abortion.

Apparently, this is how life works.

You make one decision you never thought you’d have to make (become a parent, put the baby up for adoption, or abortion), then after making that choice you’ve got to make another decision you never thought of (vacuum aspiration, dilation and evacuation, and the abortion pill).

Violet was still under the limit of 63 days after her missed period so the medicinal route was still available and the route we settled upon. For obvious reasons, it was clear to me there was somehow more horror in the whole thing if she’d have to have surgery. The idea of Violet going under the knife conjured up stomach churning images.

There was indeed something comforting—that’s not the right word, maybe ‘less terrible’—in her taking two pills instead of a procedure called vacuum aspiration. Your mind can run wild with things you wish you didn’t have to know.

Dr. Keefer had given us a pamphlet that explained the abortion pill. On the third section of the laminated tri-fold, it had a little blurb titled, *Why the pill method?*

The bullet points tried to explain the preference Violet and I had for the medical abortion route.

Many women feel like it is more “natural”—they feel it is more like a miscarriage.

How are there more natural ways of having an abortion? More than that, I wondered when it is I started understanding what these pamphlets were saying.

But there was a certain peaceful quality in taking two pills that you just don’t get with an operation of anesthetics and scalpels.

The same pamphlet laid out the three steps to our abortion.

Step 1: Abortion pill.

The pill works by blocking the hormone progesterone. Without progesterone, the lining of the uterus breaks down and the pregnancy cannot continue.

Step 2: Misoprostol.

This second pill should be taken within 48 hours of the first pill, but can be taken up to 3 days after Step 1. Misoprostol causes the uterus to empty the lining and the fertilized egg.

Step 3: the Expulsion.

More than half the women abort within 4 or 5 hours after Step 2, but mostly all within a few days. It's best to have a friend or family member to assist as the woman will be very frail during this time period.

The pamphlet laid out three easy steps. Just as the word "eventually" had defined our approach to parenthood and decision for a medical abortion, here were three easy steps which would make the difference between having a child and not.

And the Most Ironic Sentence in a Medical Pamphlet goes to...

You should start to feel better each day after the abortion.

The Quiet Veteran

There had been a ton of chatter at my grandmother's funeral.

"I remember," some unfamiliar face would say, holding a palm about a knee's height from the floor, "when you were this tall."

My uncle Jeff and I had a system: he'd give me the names of family I hadn't seen since I was four in the line leading up to us, waiting to greet them casket-side.

"That's Grandpa's cousin Johnny," he would say, or "Over there is my great aunt Georgina."

I would appropriately pretend to recall these relatives who I had met when I still needed a sippy cup and woke up early on Saturday morning to watch cartoons. (Which, according to my mom, hasn't changed one bit.)

These were explanations required for people who had not been there in over five years.

"What grade you in now?"

"I'm a junior," I'd say.

"In college?"

"No. High school."

Strangers forcing conversation.

It wasn't only me who went through the awkward exchanges.

"Oh," one family member would say, "she looks so much different than I remember her."

My grandpa said something about how Marlene's had body changed as she lost mobility.

On a given day, the primary physical movement of a late-stage Alzheimer's patient is being helped to move from bed to wheelchair to a dining table chair for a meal that doesn't require too much chewing, perhaps oatmeal. From the dining table chair, they will be assisted back into the wheelchair and placed in a recliner where they watch TV until early afternoon when they are given another easily consumed meal. Chicken noodle soup is a common lunch. More soap operas and feeble attempts at solving a simple jigsaw puzzle (usually 100, no more than 250 pieces), before they're helped into the wheelchair again and back into their bed with the guardrails. If they don't fall asleep right away, it's pretty likely they'll be given some kind of

stew that's been sitting in the crock pot all day. Something soft like a vegetable stew that's tender to avoid the possibility of choking.

The above paragraph is how I, Chance, would have explained Alzheimer's effect to the funeral visitors. The following is how my grandfather described it.

"Didn't move around much at the end," he told them.

There was an eloquent sadness in his concise summary. Despite the hopelessness that a spouse must find at some point in the care of their lifelong love dying—not just dying like most assume, but being hollowed of memories, abilities, and understanding before the body is discarded finally after the disease figures out there is nothing left to take. Despite enduring one of the most complete Hell on Earth's that I can think of, my grandfather isn't a man to dwell on the horrors.

To these family members, he keeps his explanations short. His minimalist conclusions are like that of a young soldier back from the frontlines of a war on foreign lands who has seen more atrocity and human depravity than whole stadiums people do in their collective lifetime.

"What was it like over there?" an old childhood friend asks the soldier.

The only response is: "Bad."

My grandfather uses his answers to shield others from understanding the full scope of tragedy he's been forced to witness and know every last detail of.

I'll never forget what he said to me when I came to his house after my Uncle Donny had pulled me out of school. He was more or less wandering the dining room and the kitchen while the paramedics prepared to remove my grandmother's body. He found me crying with the rest of us in the living room and looking slightly surprised to find me there.

"It's okay," he said, crying for the first time I could remember. "She's sleeping. Grandma's just sleeping."

My Waiting Room Family

Violet and I checked in for our appointment. The receptionist told us they were running behind schedule and the doctor would see us as soon as possible.

As if we were in a rush.

We sat in the two chairs near the back. Again, the waiting room was silent, but I was coming to appreciate the real meaning of this silence.

The nervous girl across from us who was about our age and noticeably alone. The couple in their thirties holding each other's hand and both staring at the ground. The mid-twenties guy pretending care about the television psychiatrist he was watching. Nobody made eye contact intentionally and if you did, both parties gave a somber but genuine grin or nod of acknowledgment.

It was silent here because there was no small talk.

The fact of our all being here we shared a mutual understanding. My waiting room family didn't need awkward conversation to catch up on the things we should know about one another.

Whether you were here for advice to help with your infertility, trying to deal with a pregnancy you didn't see coming, or in need of a test for sexually transmitted diseases, we all understood what it mean to be here.

Nobody needed to talk about the details because we all understood what it meant to find yourself in some bleak situation you didn't think would ever happen to decent, kindhearted old you.

"Violet," said the nurse holding a beat up clipboard while she stood at the door to the back examinations room. "The doctor will see you."

Only In America

My mom and I have always had an honest relationship.

She warned me about drugs and told me about how she had smoked pot in college a few times.

I let her know if I was going to be drinking with my friends. She would make sure that Al, Lydia, Violet and my other friends all had rides back home. Either that or she had us all promise we would stay the night wherever we were at.

Less than a year ago, about a month after Violet and I had started dating, I was standing in Jessica Rigby's bathroom, trying to hear my mom over Al's party mix that was blaring throughout the house.

"Put Al on the phone."

"Mom," I said, while sitting on the edge of the bathtub, "we're at a party. He said he wouldn't drink. We're going to crash on Dani's couch."

"Did I stutter? I said: put Al on the phone."

I rested the phone against my chest, exit the bathroom shaking my head, and drudgingly walk over where Al was making moves on the ladies of the party.

"Hey," I said meekly, trying my best not to interrupt. "Hey, Al."

"What's up, man?" Al said in his attempt to speak Playboy dialect. "This here is Holly."

I nodded politely, biting my tongue about the girl's 17 IQ points and lack of a bra—I assure you these two details about Holly were not separate. I said to her, "Pleasure."

He leaned in.

"I saw her first," he said in hushed tone.

"That's all yours."

"Then, I respectfully request that you go mingle elsewhere. I let you borrow my cologne and you know the rule."

Al always bought cologne. He had good taste, but it was also a pricey taste. I didn't buy the stuff because it was so expensive to do essentially what a shower does for you. However, I did borrow a spray or two when we found ourselves on the way to a social event and I didn't have time to wash up.

Al didn't mind when I took a couple spurts of the expensive European scents, but there was a condition I needed to follow:

If we both were at the same party and wearing the same scent, I was to stay out of smelling distance, especially when he was on the prowl. In his eyes, smelling the exactly like your buddy was apocalyptic.

"So can you give me a little space to do my magic?" Al would say.

"It's Robin," I said, glancing at the phone pressed against my chest. "She wants to talk."

Even in the middle of his *magic*, Al knew not to delay giving Robin her usual verbal contract.

“Why didn’t you say so?” he said, snatching the phone out of my hand. “Hello, Robin? How are you doing, dear? I didn’t mean to keep you waiting... What’s that? Yes, I promise. My cousin is at the movies right now with a date and is going to pick us up when it lets out... Yeah, I’ve got the couch all ready for your son to sleep on peacefully at my house... Of course, I will keep my eye on him. Night.”

My mom is the probably the best person to have on your side. I assure you she is also the last person you want angry at you.

To those who cross Robin, the wrath of God would be a preferable punishment.

So I knew I needed to come clean. She was going to figure out that Violet had, as they say, a bun in the oven. After our clinic appointment, I dropped Violet off and came home.

“Hey, Mom.”

I sat down next to her on the couch. She was watching that Judge Trudy show I was mentioned earlier.

“Hey, stranger.”

If she wasn’t smiling when she said it, I would have been more worried about the “stranger” part.

I asked her about the small claims case she was watching. She caught me up to speed. Apparently, the plaintiff had been at a bachelor party and getting a lap dance for the defendant, a stripper, when he was knocked out cold by—and I kid you not—Miss Luscious Lavender’s 34DD boobs.

(Do I even need to note that these ta-tas were not of the natural variety?)

“Knock-out knockers” was the term my mom used.

The plaintiff’s case was thrown out. I sensed Judge Trudy was making an extra effort to keep a serious tone in her summation.

“The defendant was simply conducting her job—in what seems to me—a normal manner for performing a lap dance. There was nothing reckless about her performance of this duty. The plaintiff’s injuries, from the doctor’s report, appear to be exaggerated grossly. Even if I did believe that the plaintiff were genuine, they were not in any way serious or life threatening. His argument would be the equivalent to somebody suing a liquor store for getting them drunk and losing their job—”

“But judge—” the plaintiff interjected.

“Oh come on buddy,” my mom said to the TV. “Now, you don’t do that.”

The plaintiff made the dumbest mistake one can make on Judge Trudy: interrupting Judge Trudy. Before coming to the show, this guy should have caught up on his re-runs.

“Excuse me, sir,” the judge said. “But I am delivering my decision and it would be wise of you not to speak while I am speaking unless you want to be hit with a fine for contempt of court. Just like I can go into a restaurant and get sick from having too much dessert, the plaintiff went in to the Busy Beaver Gentleman’s Club and got the services he asked for. It is my own tough luck for eating chocolate mousse cake when I don’t do well with sweets just as it the plaintiff’s tough luck for getting hit by the breasts of a woman whom he paid to—well, frankly—he paid to have her hit him with her breasts.”

The theme music played the show into commercials.

“Only in America,” Robin said, switching the channel.

Where Words Aren’t Necessary

“So long time, no see,” my mom said, turning off the TV.

What an understatement.

We both turned towards each other at our respective ends of the couch. I was finally beginning to appreciate the distance that could exist between two people. Al and Lydia hadn’t stopped sitting next to each other in study hall. God is said to be everywhere, but I couldn’t see God anywhere though. My mom and I lived in the same house, but we hadn’t had a real conversation since the funeral.

“How’ve you been?” I said.

She nodded, pondering the question. This is how genuine my mother is: a question that people normally shrug off with thoughtless one word answers is something she tries to give a sincere answer for.

“I’ve been okay. Not great, but okay, you know?”

I understood that feeling better than I ever cared to.

“How’ve you been?” she added.

“Same.”

Again, she nodded in a knowing way. There was another one of those silences, like the one in the clinic waiting room.

A silence that signified understanding. Perhaps understanding a little too well the troubles of another.

“I miss her,” she said. Her voice was quivering now.

“Me too.”

Neither of us said anything about the tears.

Another moment of understanding. Words aren’t always necessary.

“You know,” Robin said, “I never saw cardinals at work. Maybe I didn’t notice them, but I really don’t think they were there before. Every day I have lunch in the teacher’s lounge. There’s this tree right outside the window and I don’t know if it’s because it’s almost springtime or what, but there’s cardinals hanging out.”

I didn’t know, still don’t, why but my grandmother loved cardinals. Marlene had boatloads of little knickknacks with those birds—only cardinals—on them that she had collected over the years.

Her favorite color was red.

My grandpa had told me Marlene was just sleeping. I’d told my mom that Marlene was still spying in on my mom’s life in the form of birds.

Both my grandfather and I tried our best to believe what we said.

A Canadian Physicists I Used To Know

“When are you going to Canada?”

She said it calmly enough, as if she were asking me about what new music I had been listening to.

I must have looked like I had stuck a fork in a light socket.

“How did you—”

“I found a couple pages about a Canadian physicist I used to know in the printer tray.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” she said. “You’re not doing anything wrong. I knew this day would come eventually. For a few years now you’ve never really asked about him. I should have told you about him earlier but I wasn’t sure when the right time was.”

“I kept putting it off, too.”

“Let’s quit procrastinating then, shall we?”

I nodded.

“Where should I start?” she said.

“How’d you guys meet?”

She settled herself into the couch. I was about to hear all the things I’d been too afraid to ask.

“I knew a guy who worked for the Kent State Student and he asked me if I wanted a job. I was serving at an Italian restaurant and tired of it, so being a receptionist sounded like a nice change of pace...”

She told me about the idiot who had asked her out on a date. The dive bars they went to on dates. The way even though you’d think he’d be some nerd with his head plunged in a physics book that he was the biggest social butterfly she had ever met.

“He would sit at one of those long tables in the Student Center, in the food court area, with his books and graph paper spread out. Oh, and always a pack of cigarettes with an ashtray within arm’s reach. Your father would chain smoke—you were still allowed to smoke indoors then—”

The billows of dirty cigarette smoke. Just the thought of smell of tobacco made my nose scrunch up.

“—pretending to be studying away but when he saw somebody he knew, he’d feign surprise and pop up. He’d offer to take a break from his hard studies to catch up with whomever. He was a goofball.”

My mom said the word (goofball) with a clear affection that caught me off guard.

In that instant, Robin was able to forget about the three minimum wage jobs she worked while still under the poverty line and the abandonment of a lover, a partner in the daunting task of being a parent who up and left back to the wife he’d cheated on. In that moment, my mother was only remembering the silliness that had attracted her to this man, a goofball chain smoking while he pretended to study.

Robin told me about how she got a call at work one day and heard music at the other end of the line, the phone receiver held up to a radio. She listened to the song, singing:

I just called to say I love you. I just called to say how much I care.

She told the story of my father meeting the rest of the family one Thanksgiving. My Uncle Jeff tried to teach Charlie how to play basketball. My father hadn’t ever played a sport that didn’t require ice and snow.

I didn’t want to see it that way, but what I was hearing was clearly a love story. More than what she told me, it was the way she told me. After how many years of betrayal and continued abandonment, the affection was there.

And this is where it became one of those countless tales of love’s hazards:

“On a date of ours, we ran into Missy, one of my friends from college I hadn’t seen since freshman year. A girl who lived on my dorm floor. Missy looked uneasy when I introduced her to my boyfriend, Charlie. It made me pause, but I didn’t think much of it. She and I made plans to get lunch that week. When we did, she told me she had known Charlie before. They had

introduced themselves like they had never met before so I had thought Missy was feeling off about something else, not Charlie, though.”

This college friend of my mom’s, Missy, already knew Charlie. To Missy, Charlie was a friend of a friend. But Missy had run into Charlie the year before with that mutual friend. He was with a woman he’d introduced as his wife. Missy couldn’t remember her name, probably Natalie, but definitely something starting with the letters “N” and “A.”

Charlie and Probably Natalie had a little baby girl, too.

The next day in front of this indoor water fountain, Robin confronted Charlie. It’s on the first floor of the Kent State Student Center. They were both on their way to work.

“I said, point blank to him, ‘Are you married?’ The idiot had the nerve to look behind him and say, ‘Who? Me?’ Like I could possibly be talking to someone else.”

Robin and Charlie broke up. He told her he missed her. He said the marriage was an arrangement, not a romance. They kept a strictly friends relationship through the winter and still got along fine at work, a testament to my mom’s ability to forgive.

“I was supposed to go to Florida with the rest of the crazies,” my mother said. (The crazies being our family.) “The week of spring break my senior year. We had it all planned out but your grandfather got sick so we postponed the trip until after I graduated. I was even going to go home for a couple days but my boss at the student center had a couple extra shifts I could pick up. Your grandmother was warning me that everybody at home was coming down with whatever Grandpa had. So I stayed.”

Remember, this is when Gabby was having her first birthday party in Canada.

During the break, Kent State became a ghost town, at least the areas surrounding campus. Robin’s roommate and most of her friends had gone home or on trips. Charlie hadn’t gone back to Canada and was also working at the nearly vacant student center. They talked through the walkie-talkies. She bossed him around more.

He asked her to get a drink after work. She remembered hesitating but not what made her finally say yes. Maybe the way he smiled. It could have been that nothing good was on TV that night. For all she and we know, it could have been the Half Off Margarita Happy Hour at a bar nearby.

But what she does remember is this.

“We were sitting there,” Robin said now, our home absolutely quiet except for her voice, “and then on the television over the bar, they were announcing the winning lotto numbers. ‘Want to play our game?’ he said.”

When they had dated the first time around, Robin and Charlie would try to guess the Pick 3 numbers. They’d place small bets on it, nothing more than a dollar or two.

Just like Lydia, Al, and me, with the Paternity Test Betting.

“Cross my heart,” my mother said, mimicking the motions of children making their oaths of truth. “I guessed the exact three numbers. What are the odds?”

In case you were wondering, they are 1-in-729.

Or 0.00137174211248% if you’re more of a percentage person.

Before this conversation, I hadn’t known my mother had known Charlie was married to someone else when I was conceived. I had always assumed she had found out after she was pregnant.

My mother didn’t go into too much detail about how they got back together. He could have made promises to change or explained that he wasn’t a perfect man but he knew that he loved Robin. Maybe he tossed out the idea of divorce.

Perhaps only Robin and God know what made her get back together with Charlie.

Two months before her graduation from Kent State University, my mother felt sick and threw up one morning before class.

"I knew it was morning sickness as soon as it happened."

"What do you mean you knew?"

"I don't know. It just felt...different."

"So what did he say when you told him?"

Her face made a slight grimace.

"Impossible. He said he couldn't have a child. He told me how he was required by the Canadian government to come back after we graduated that May. I could never get him to talk about his wife and little girl but that was all he spoke of. I don't want to be that parent who is always trying to make the other parent out as the bad one."

True, my mother had never mentioned any of this before. It struck me that this instinct for impartiality was the instinct of a parent. It was fundamental selflessness.

Is there a quality that more distinctly characterizes a good parent than selflessness?

"After I told him about you," she said, "he got real nasty."

This was the only negative opinion of Charlie that my mother ever uttered. The rest was all facts.

Love's Hazards

A nurse showed us into the room and, again, assured us that the doctor would be with us. You could tell we'd be sitting in Room 4 for a little while before Dr. Keefer showed up.

The paper on the exam table crinkled, astoundingly loud as Violet sat down. For a second, I wasn't sure if I should sit in the chair next to it or the exam table. I wasn't the one having the abortion. Was it inappropriate for me to sit down right next to Violet? I was afraid I'd make some minor shift in body position as Doctor Keefer was explaining the medical details and set off an obnoxiously loud distraction of that wax paper crink, crink, crinkling away.

I could almost see the two women, Violet and the doctor, talking in quiet, solemn tones about the dumbass who knocked up this poor intelligent girl on her way off to college and changing the world. I'd be that bungling idiot who couldn't stop moving and making the whole room sound like a thousand pieces of newspaper are being crumpled up.

Violet looked at me standing there and patted the spot next to her on paper softly, telling me, "Sit."

This small gesture of Violet's should help someone understand some of the beauty of our relationship.

Me: worrying about all the possible outcomes of everything, including something as minor as which seat to sit in.

Violet: following her gut reaction and showing me the simplicity of just doing it.

"Sit."

More than that wonderful certainty of action Violet can inspire in me, there is something beautifully instinctual about us. More than the birds and the bees.

Is this what makes love?

Take a trip to a book store, especially some corporate chain, and there'll be a whole section dedicated to dating and relationships. Big books with steps galore on how to find a

partner and lists upon lists of things that are said to be absolutely necessary to foster a healthy relationship.

Go into your living room and you can find television psychiatrists who make a living off that sort of instruction.

Head to the movies. About half of the films will be based on the many nuances and difficulties of a romantic relationship.

Turn on the radio. Songs about love, especially breakups and complications, are guaranteed to be in full rotation.

Perhaps the largest, most frequent interest to so many people across the globe and the main subject of an endless amount of art in every genre is:

How Hard It Is To Be In Love.

The many sticky situations that arise between lovers will forever interest us. That's why they keep cranking out songs about heartache and self-help books.

If it hasn't been clear already, I'm a tough customer.

Lucky for you, I'm going spare you my standard rants about the boring plotlines of romantic comedies. I don't bring this subject up to point out the entertainment empires that are practically built around this one subject.

I bring it up because the complications of love are a fundamental part of human experience. It is something we are forever drawn to.

We are forever drawn to romantic complexities like the insects attracted to the brilliant light of a bug zapper.

Too grim? Yeah, I think so too.

Or perhaps it's more that we're forever attracted to the problems between lovers, the uphill battle that is the very nature of being a lover. Because these are the struggles that every human has felt at one point in pursuit of something all people have wanted in one form or another: love.

Probably from the beginning of time.

Adam: Why the hell did you make me bite the fruit?

*Eve: What do you mean I **made** you bite the fruit? You asked me what I was eating and I offered you a bite. Why didn't **you** tell me God told us not to eat the fruit?*

Adam: I thought you knew.

Eve: Just like a man to assume. You know what they say about assuming—it makes an ass out of 'U' and 'me.' Nobody told me anything besides that serpent.

Adam [with a sarcastic tone]: Naïve Eve. Didn't you think it was a bit odd that a snake was talking to you? You don't find anything peculiar about that whole talking reptile thing?

Eve: Oh by all means, go right ahead and change the subject.

Not hard to picture, is it?

Pursuing romantic love is in the very fabric of our beings. And this is not only true for the glowing sun-is-always-shining people either.

Even Hitler had a fiancé.

Yes, the most infamous mastermind behind grand scale genocide felt this same pull.

In many ways, we're more informed than the bugs being drawn in the bright blue light. The countless movies, books, and songs are all warning us about the problems that await.

This book is one of those.

(For my readers, unplanned pregnancy may be part of the gig.)

But there's a reason so many people make that decision to fly directly towards the bright blue bug zapper.

First though, I'll admit my bug zapper metaphor is overstating the negativity of relationships. Death by electrocution is not precisely the fate of lovers. Some rare exceptions sure, but I can safely say that falling in love does not normally cause death by electrocution.

There are, however, real hazards.

So just as the insect pursues the overwhelming beauty, the basic attraction, to the bright blue light of the bug zapper, people pursue the love they've heard about on the radio, seen on TV, read in books, and observed in everyday life.

(Anybody who has watched an elderly couple hold hands and laugh with each other should understand what I'm talking about.)

Knowing the plethora of problems that come hand in hand with any romance, billions of people throughout history have decided to brace themselves and dive head first into love in spite of the obstacles arising from when two people try to combine their lives into one.

The desire to find romantic love is an instinct. With smiles, we fly towards that lovely blue light.

I can't help but love, Violet.

You could have sat me down the day before I met her and explained all the problems our being together would cause, even the pregnancy. "That's terrible," I would have said. "I don't want to cause that trouble for her or me. I must not fall in love with this girl, uh, what'd you say her name was? Rose? Oh yeah, that's right, Violet. Not dating that girl, no way, no how."

I'll tell you something: I would have fallen for her anyway.

In some ways we pick who we talk to and date, but I assure you, we don't choose who we love.

The only choice we have is whether or not we recognize true love. (Please excuse my use of the sappy melodramatic phrase of "true love".)

It is easy to get lost in the many things it seems we need to remember in order to steer clear of love's hazards. You can spend every waking moment of your life jotting down notes from well intentioned advice columns on dating from relationship experts (who is it again that determines who is and isn't a relationship expert?) on television giving what could be pretty sound advice for couples. You could do that and still fail miserably, failing to spend a day really utterly in love with another human being.

Because while that might be helpful advice, love is something you must do in your own style, not a generic, one-size-fits-all mold. Expression of real love doesn't require you to follow the expert's rules. Love may seem complex what with all that's been said and will continue to be said about the infinite ways it exists.

Love is simple, though. It's an instinct demanding you be by your lover's side.

The need that Love conjures up inside you will make you forget about the loud, crinkly wax paper when she pats her hand down on a spot next to her.

This is my spot, I thought sitting down on the damn wax paper. This is where I must be.

PURE Stupidity

“Why were you watching those kids playing?” Violet asked.

“No reason,” I said. “I got to the school earlier than expected, took a walk around the block. That’s where Lydia, Al, and I played when we were that age.”

“That’s cute. We were all about Tag at my school. What’d you guys play?”

Apparently, Violet also knew how to play the game I had been playing, the only object was to talk as much as possible about absolutely anything else than abortion.

I had showed up to study hall early to talk to Mr. Berry about trigonometry. I found out more about the Law of Cosines than anyone should care to know.

Still, Violet didn’t need to explain her need to shoot the shit while we waited for the doctor.

“Sometimes, we played tag,” I said, “but it was all about Hide and Seek in our day. It was too excellent a location.”

“That little forest in the center of it would make some awesome hiding spots.”

“But you’ve got to be careful,” I said. “This one game, Al was up in the trees but he was notorious for moving when the Seeker got too close.”

“Always knew he was a lowlife cheater,” Violet said, dry with her humor.

“Don’t worry. He got his comeuppance,” I said, still seeing the thing clearly in my mind. “There was a period where he got so good at moving around that he’d hop from tree to tree and circle the outside of the miniature forest when the Seeker was in the middle. Then one day Mr. Al hopped a little too hard on another branch and it snapped under his weight. Needless to say, he was found.”

“Was he okay?” Violet said, holding her laughter with the concern.

“Arm in a cast for a few months, but that’s it.”

“There’s something beautiful about watching children play,” Violet said. “It’s the definition of carefree.”

You could hear in her voice how she longed for that feeling as we sat in the clinic.

The sound of the wax paper on the examination table, the fluorescent lights and the millions of objects that were just not quite the color white. These were subtle yet constant reminders that the architects of this place were purposely trying to keep you calm, because for whatever has brought you are here, you should probably, for good reason, be worried out of your little mind.

Like so many shared anxieties and problems, we didn’t need to explain this to each other. As the saying goes, it goes without saying.

Violet was looking over my shoulder at the wall behind me. It was a poster, titled, “The ABCs of Staying Fit.” It was a children’s drawing, and for every letter, there was a crayon scribble illustrating an activity, most of them sports, for what you could do to stay fit.

Sound familiar?

It isn’t bad to borrow and take ideas from other organizations, especially ones trying to help kids stay healthy and happy.

It is bad policy to claim you’re some invaluable source of leadership and creativity when you propose a brand new project for your organization, claiming the idea as your own brain child with its “revolutionary approach” (Margot’s words) to educating children about better lifestyles.

Violet took out a scrap of paper and wrote down the posters info, saying, “Busted.”

We talked and talked about how stupid Margot had been and Violet’s plans for a PURE coup, keeping the words coming so long as they did not mention the actual reality of our situation.

There was a tap on the door and all was silent again.

The Stars' Lesson for Us

"How've you been doing?" I said to my mom. "With, you know, everything?"

Robin didn't hesitate to answer.

"I miss her."

She was talking about my grandmother, her mother, Marlene.

"We knew what was going to happen for so long, even before the diagnosis, I knew something wasn't right."

Tears were forming in her eyes.

"And I had more time with her than most people ever get with their moms," she said.

"But I still want more."

If only my Great-Aunt Laverne's wish could come true.

Remember? She's the one I punched in the face at the wake. That's not important to remember, but what is important to keep in mind was her wish: Laverne wanted to give all the time she had spent with Marlene to Marlene's children and me.

The woman sitting before me was teacher who'd spent her career in the rough and tumble Cleveland Public School System and she is a master of understatement. The only times I've found out about the insanity of her job are when I've been persistent enough in my afterschool questioning.

Once, my mother told me about a little girl in kindergarten who she caught playing with something shiny. Robin innocently asked, "Whatcha playing with?" The girl opened her hand to show a 6.5 x 55mm Swedish hollow tip bullet she had found on her father's bedroom floor.

"Do you know where your Dad's guns are?" my mother said.

"Yes," the little girl said, smiling because she knew the answer to the teacher's question.

"In the closet."

"Are they locked up?"

"No."

"Can you get to them?"

"He puts them high up on the shelf," she said, adding proudly, "but I can get a stool and get to them."

Another time, a child broke his leg on the playground and when my mother got the parent on the phone, the kid's mother instructed Robin not to get an ambulance, said he was "faking it." My mother got the ambulance anyways. When the student went to the hospital, it became clear why the mother didn't want the kid to go in.

The 9 year old boy had plastic sandwich bags of marijuana and prescription pills hidden in his pockets, the ones with the patches of cartoon trains on them.

Robin didn't tell me until a week after about two kids from the middle school nearby who had chased each other through her school's playground midday with handguns, shooting through the busy recess.

The list of these horror stories goes on and on.

But this veteran of inner city education wasn't that same woman in this moment. She wasn't the pushy secretary who'd bossed my idiot of a father around.

On the couch, Robin was just a woman who missed her mother.

“The whole time she was getting worse,” my mother said, “I started to really see how bad it got. She was suffering. In my heart, I knew it was for the best.”

It's for the best.

When my great-Aunt Laverne had said it, I'd sent her with a suckerpunch into the second row of folding chairs in the funeral home. I still don't know whether I believe death can be better than life.

God only knows.

I didn't want to argue with her about the moral issues surrounding this statement as I had with Laverne—which was largely argued through my fists.

Instead, I just wanted to give my mom a hug.

So I did.

After the waterworks, my mom and I got to talking about cardinals we'd seen. I told my mother about how Marlene taught me to play card games while she babysat me. She told me about how Marlene would always come down to Kent to take Robin out to eat and just talk for hours on end. Then, I confessed how my grandmother would sneak maple sugar candies to me when Robin proclaimed I had had enough sweets. She told me the story about Marlene giving tours to the strangers at the hospital of her daughter Robin and baby me.

I had heard it a million times, but I swear could hear it ten million more.

We kept talking so long that before we knew it was pitch dark outside. The entire evening had been a mixture of laughter and tears.

“It's funny how,” my mother said, “this is all that's left. There are photographs and old clothes, but she's really gone. She's only memories now.”

Just then I remembered something Lydia had told me.

“Put on your shoes,” I said, grabbing our coats. “I want to show you something.”

What's that song? Well, I guess it doesn't really matter. All you need to know is the line that goes, “You see stars that clear...”

We drove about fifteen minutes away from the highway towards a cornfield. At a safe spot where we'd be able to see cars coming from a ways off in either direction, I pulled off to the side of the road and turned on the hazard lights.

My mom and I hopped up and sat on the trunk. It was a clear night and the sky was saturated with stars. There were so many I thought somebody must have snuck up there and added more since the last time I looked. But nobody had, it was just that you could see all those extra ones that are usually too dim to see from the city.

“This is nice,” I said.

“The stars are beautiful,” she said. “I don't know when the last time I took the time to look up at them.”

I had a guess about when the last time had been. We sat there on the trunk of my car, staring at the stars, like we used to do every morning before she went off to work and I went off to daycare.

“I know it's scary to think she's only a memory when she lost all of hers,” I said. “But check this out.”

I gave a brief astronomy review of how light can only travel so fast and how scientists measure the distances to stars using light years, or how much distance light travels in one year.

“Where you going with this, Chance?”

“Lydia taught me this,” I said.

“This isn’t about how Neil Armstrong didn’t actually land on the moon again, is it?” my mom said.

Lydia’s less than conventional ideas were well known by others.

“No, I promise. See that bright one over there?” I said, aiming my index finger with my right eye shut.

“Yep.”

“That’s Proxima Centauri. Right now, it’s the closest star to earth. It’s four light years from earth. So that means the light we’re seeing now is—”

“From four years ago,” she finished my sentence. “Your mother isn’t a complete moron. I hear she’s actually licensed by the state of Ohio to teach children.”

This fact may not seem like much. But then I pointed a few of the stars Lydia had shown me, each further away.

“The light coming from the ones billions of light years away,” I said, “is what we see right now on a normal Thursday night. So right now, we’re seeing light from when the dinosaurs roamed.”

“Before that even,” my mom said.

“A lot of them have been burnt out for millions, maybe billions of years, but we won’t know until we see their light goes out.”

We both tilted our heads back and watched the light that had begun its trip from before us, before the dinosaurs, before the earth itself was formed. We discussed all that beauty in the chandelier spread out above the cornfield.

We talked about how odd it was that stars could shine so gracefully before our very eyes long after they aren’t there.

For the life of me, I can’t remember which damn song I’m thinking of, but anyways, the line goes:

“You see stars that clear have been dead for years. But the idea just lives on.”

When The Lights Go Out

The light from the sun takes eight minutes to get to earth. So if the sun suddenly disappeared and vanished into thin space, it would take us eight minutes to find out the bad news.

Now what if an astronomer had some fancy machine that gave off a warning signal to the world?

Eight minutes till it all goes black. Sure, there’ll be some electric lights and battery powered flashlights to use, but those won’t take too long to run out of juice either. In eight minutes, the plants that supply our oxygen and feed us will start dying and the planet will start to get cold, not to mention the panic.

Oh, the panic. The running of the bulls will look like a walk in the park compared to what’s coming.

What do you do in those eight precious minutes?

Tick. Tock. You’re wasting time.

The smart ones will sit down and pour a glass from that bottle they’ve been saving. The loving parents lucky enough to be home will walk calmly to the nursery and play Peek-a-Boo to

hear their children's sweet laughter. Thoughtful lovers will lock the doors and orgasm their way into the apocalypse.

But most of us, we'll run around, as the saying goes, like chickens with our heads cut off. The centuries that have gone into our biological hardwiring sending a single message again and again on repeat:

Run.

So we'll waste the short time we have left screaming and yelling. And before you know it, it'll all be over.

These eight minutes are how I think it would feel to be diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. The doctor comes in and tells you that you've got less than a decade. He or she then begins to explain what will happen to your body, the various stages of deterioration. The doctor tells you about possible treatments, drugs that might be able to delay the inevitable. But by then you're not listening in any coherent fashion, your mind is a flurry and it tells you again over and over, "Run, let's get the fuck out of here!"

But there's absolutely nowhere to go.

So you spend your days panicking until it all goes black.

An Imaginary Club Sandwich / Make Me, Idiot

After Charlie's marriage, the fateful decision to stay in Kent for spring break, and the morning sickness, I asked about how things had gone with Charlie. Did he run with his tail tucked between his legs back to Canada? Did he feed Robin false hopes of leaving Natalie?

"I'm sorry I haven't told you," my mother said. "It's just not something I knew how to say."

Apparently, this was a feeling that becomes more frequent with age.

"I told him," she said, her eyes going distant. They were reserved the way they looked when she'd tell me about a student's arm turning deep colors of bruises made by a parent's hand.

What happened, Student X?

I fell.

"He said it couldn't have been his. I told him it couldn't have been anybody else, unless he thought I was the next Virgin Mary," she chuckled. "He didn't see the humor. That's funny though, trust me."

Talk about an awkward conversation:

Hey, Joseph. I wanted to tell you something.

Oh, hey Mary. You thought about what I said? Ready to have sex? I promise it'll be a good time.

No, I'm fine, thanks. About that though. Still a virgin, but funny thing happened...

For as devious and lying as Charlie had been about his marriage, he was upfront when yours truly came into the picture.

"He said he was going back home after he graduated," said Robin. Her eyes said everything she wasn't saying aloud. "Suddenly, he was concerned with being a husband and a father to his family. I wanted to say, 'Isn't this your family, too?' He told me all the time how I couldn't do it. How I wouldn't be able to raise a kid on my own."

Robin told Charlie to go back to Canada and forget this ever happened.

"I said to myself: Fine, I'll do this on my own."

You don't need to look any further to see where I get my stubbornness.

Charlie and Robin got distant, again. He started seeing another girl on campus. But Robin wasn't concerned about Charlie's dating life. She had bigger fish to fry. They still treated each other with respect for the following months at work and that's just how it was going to have to be.

There had been a flash of hope when Robin's walkie-talkie went off at work.

"Want to grab a bite to eat and talk? I know a place nearby with a good club sandwich."

My mother said yes because maybe they could talk and maybe she wouldn't have to be so tough. Maybe she wouldn't have to go this whole parenting thing alone.

Robin took off all that armor she had been forced to put on and said, "Sounds delicious."

She offered to drive but Charlie insisted. They followed human nature so they talked about everything except what was on both their minds. She pretended not to notice but she thought it was sweet when she realized Charlie had stopped himself from lighting a cigarette.

They talked so much Robin had that wonderful feeling of getting lost in a conversation. It was nice to laugh again with the man she really did love. She was so involved in the catching up that she didn't notice that they'd been driving for a while.

Charlie had been driving to Akron, Ohio, which is about a 25 minute drive from Kent. A place known primarily for its rubber factories, not club sandwiches.

However, this was a small detail. Charlie said he knew a place.

They talked about graduation, mutual friends, prospective jobs, as they danced around the elephant in the room: the child growing inside of Robin. But this flow of conversation was not odd to Robin because it is natural to avoid talking about the hard things.

The same way I wanted to talk to Lydia about farfetched conspiracies, Al about George Washington's asshole-ishness, and Violet about Margot's smoking.

Anything besides how I'd fucked up.

But Charlie's car finally stopped. They had reached their destination. Robin kept talking for a little before she realized Charlie's mood had changed. This is when Robin finally looked where they had parked.

It wasn't a restaurant. But what was it then?

There wasn't much to see, besides a few dingy brick buildings in a city built around factories. It was a blue collar city with not much in the way of architectural design. Things here were built not for beauty, but for practical purposes.

The street they were on was chock full of these plain brick buildings, but what they were directly parked outside of had a window dusted with the dirt coming out of the rubber factories. Nothing here could ever be quite clean. The light gray powder was on everything and everyone in the city.

Robin squinted to read the chipped white lettering painted on the window.

She made out what the letters read. The puzzle pieces fit together in the ugliest of ways.

"I didn't move or scream," my mother told me. "At some point, I wasn't in the car anymore. I was looking down on his beat up station wagon. I had been flipping the channels and wandered in on a movie where a misguided girl had gotten mixed up with a guy who didn't know what he wanted. And all I could think was *poor girl*. I wanted to ask her, *How'd you get yourself here?*"

Charlie hadn't taken Robin to get a club sandwich. He had instead taken my mother to an abortion clinic.

He demanded she get out of the car. The girl in the movie didn't budge.

“That one, she was feisty,” Robin said. “She held her ground.”

As previously mentioned, without Kent cigarettes, I wouldn’t be here, telling you about how I got my girlfriend pregnant. If Charlie hadn’t picked up the smoking habit, then not a word of this book is written. Maybe instead of having to listen to yours truly babble, you would be doing something in, say, the way of self improvement.

I hear yoga does wonders.

But also responsible for my being here is my mother’s trademark stubbornness. She doesn’t let the lunacy of the Cleveland Public Schools stop her from doing what she feels she needs to. She is a woman who understands the millions of factors, most working against a person at any given moment, says to herself, “Says who?” and does what she needs to. She doesn’t listen to any goddamn Canadian physicist who tells her over and over how she can’t possibly raise a child on her own.

Instead, she gets busy substitute teaching at schools that are over an hour away, gets up to take her son to daycare at 5 am, tries to make an impact on some of the most hopeless children you care to meet, drives another 90 minutes back, spends time with her goofball child and does it all over again the next morning.

This douche bag in the car has the nerve to tell her to get out of his car. Robin just sits back in her seat, folds her arms across her chest, and says with tears streaming down her face, “Make me, idiot.”

Where does Chance’s stubbornness come from? I assure you I’ve learned from the best.

“It was the weirdest thing,” she tells me. “When I looked, there was a cross, the peak of a church perfectly positioned in the rearview mirror.”

The cross was not what made Robin’s decision but she took it as a sign that someone or something was backing her up. That’s the thing about signs: signs aren’t blared over a megaphone. They are things that are easily overlooked. They’re hidden in the minutia of day-to-day life.

And this, too: signs are forever debatable.

These seemingly insignificant things mean the world to someone in an instant.

“It was like somebody had put that cross right there. Some spirit saying they were with me.”

But to another it may just seem only mere coincidence.

God only knows.

The Aborted Abortion

Remember, 1 in 3 women in the United States have an abortion by the age of 45.

Over seventeen years after Charlie had taken Robin to get a club sandwich that didn’t exist in an effort to make your host, Chance, not exist, another idiot took a girl he had gotten pregnant to get an abortion. Violet and I were talking about her plans for PURE takeover when there was a tap on the door.

When it all went silent.

Doctor Keefer entered.

“So I hear you guys have made your decision,” she said, jotting a note on her clipboard.

We had. We had taken the abortion pill route. The doctor nodded and gave us the necessary forms to sign. Thankfully, Violet had turned 18 the month before so legally we didn't have to inform our parents about the abortion.

Dr. Keefer presented us with the necessary pills. The two pills that would allow Violet to still go to college on a free ride and Chance to figure out how to not be responsible for accidentally raising the next Hitler or become that parent looking like a deer in headlights on the six o'clock, for both of us to have what we wanted out of life and to have a kid only when we were ready.

Two easy little tablets and we could pursue all those elaborate plans we had about our lives.

The doctor went through the timelines of the thing again.

"You take this pill first," she said passing the pill to Violet in a small plastic cup. "This will break down the lining of your uterus so the egg can't attach properly. Then sometime tomorrow you'll take the misoprostol—after 12 hours of the first pill but before 36 hours has passed. That one will cause the uterus to empty."

Empty. The word stuck out there in the room.

"And you'll go through something very similar to a miscarriage, possible intense cramping, you should have someone nearby to take care of you for the day. Make sense?"

We nodded.

There was another knock on the door. Dr. Keefer went over and cracked it open.

"You're kidding me" is all I could make out from their whispers.

"I'm sorry but there's a minor emergency in the other room," she said. "A girl got her STDs test back and it didn't go well. She just threw a chair out of the window."

Violet commented on how crazy that was. I said, "You don't get that every day."

Doctor Keefer didn't see a joke and said, "Happens more than you'd think. Anyways, that's really all there is to it. I need to get going, but there's no rush. Take all the time you need and when you're done taking the first pill, follow the instructions. Be sure to make a follow-up with the receptionist on the way out."

There was screaming outside the doors:

"Bastard told me I was his first!"

More crash sounds followed.

"I've got to get going," Dr. Keefer said, still composed but hurrying out. "Call if you have any questions."

And it all went silent again—at least inside of the room. We could hear the occasional obscenity-laced shriek and crashing of anything that hadn't been bolted down in the other room.

I was frightened by those measly tablets sitting in front of us. Each was 250 milligrams of finality. We had made a decision, but here we were staring at consequence.

Violet and I were quiet. We'd run out of things to distract ourselves with.

It was time for the shit to hit the fan.

Violet looked at me. Her eyes looked how I felt: like we'd been driving around for days through the same streets which never became any more familiar, never knowing which direction to turn, completely clueless about whether the turns we had made put us closer to or further from where we thought we should be going.

This, like the rest of my life, was the opposite of what I'd expected. We had come to find a certain strange relief. The solution to our mistakes lay within these pills. Why did I feel like I'd been dropped here and sucker punched?

Violet's mouth parted and it took a few seconds for words to come out. She said, "Chance, I'm sorry." She grabbed the first pill and held it close to her face, peering down at the medication like it was mud on her white dress.

I wouldn't have been able to explain it then, but I had begun watching a movie I'd happen to find flipping through the channels. This one was about some moron who'd knocked up a nice girl—a girl that had ambitions and dreams—and now he couldn't even remember what flawed logic had brought him to this abortion clinic.

It is easier to lose yourself than you might want to believe.

Now, I was watching this moron who was frozen, scared shitless by a prescription.

Violet said it again. "I'm sorry, Chance."

Her hand and the pill rose for a second, and then went back down. She placed the plastic cup back on the tablet. "I can't do it, Chance. I know this is going to change everything for you, but I can't do it."

Finally, the moron screen snaps out of it.

Before my brain could process the events, a warmth spread through my body. The right thing was happening. I was feeling the relief that comes after the long, confusing journey in making a life altering decision and knowing the simplicity of the right choice.

Not quite the perfect or the easy choice, but the right one.

Tears and laughter proceeded. Do they always come together to the party right when the shit hits the fan?

"The kids playing Hide and Seek," Violet said.

Where I had seen only my search for Charlie, Violet had found our sign.

"Chance, that's how parenting is."

No storks, no cabbage patches for couples at the exact right moment in their life coming to choose their ideal child.

The missed period, the morning sickness, they're a baby's way of yelling out as loud as possible, "Ready or not! Here I come."

Somewhere in the Sum of All Things Baby, the talks about our plans with Violet's college and my eventual approach to parenting, and the infinite list of other things that could have gone better and been more in step with our own notions of how we thought we should become parents—somewhere in all the mess I got lost in the details.

Yes, there were so many things working against us keeping the child. The options were countless and terrifying, but don't get lost in all that head spinning noise, because deep down there's a quiet whisper. And if you listen to it, you can brush off the mountains of anxiety and panic, and make the right choice.

Whatever the situation, there's going to be all those complicated odds to figure out, probabilities indicating the best decision, but when it's finally show time, it's always either a simple *yes* or *no*.

It wasn't what we had planned on, but I can say not having the abortion was the best thing that ever happened to Violet and me. That I'm sure of.

This, dear reader, is the difference between *no* and *yes*. Between becoming 1-in-3 and becoming 2-in-3.

This is how Violet and I became Mom and Dad.

As Good A Place As Any

I asked her to tell me more about Charlie, the man.

“He was very funny,” she said, her face looking like he had just told her a joke. “He was always making people laugh. He would go anywhere at any time if somebody suggested something. Up for any adventure. I never saw him actually studying, only chain smoking in the food court with the books open, but never looking down at them, eyes always up watching for a familiar face. He got straight A’s though. I don’t know how.”

“What made him come to Kent?” I asked.

“I haven’t told you this?” my mother said, chuckling.

With a mischievous look on her face, she told me I’d like this. A kid getting ready to tell a dirty joke he’d overheard some uncle say at the family reunion.

“He was doing that program where the Canadian government sent him to whatever public American university for free. I thought this was a joke the first time he told me, cause you know, I asked him the same thing: what makes a guy from Montreal decide on Kent State of all places? They gave him a list of every college that he was eligible to go in the United States. A normal person, not an idiot, would do research on the places. Make a visit or two. Not your father, though.”

She rolled her eyes while she chuckled.

“He takes the sheet of paper with the American universities on them, sits down, and starts puffing away on cigarettes like he always did. As he goes through the list, none of them rings a bell. Then, one stands out. I know how ridiculous this is but this is your father for you.”

My father had been a mischievous child, evidently. At the age of nine, he snuck cigarettes from his grandfather. (I had to put Violet’s eyes back in her head when I retold this story to her.) He chain smoked and only ever smoked one brand his whole life.

“None of the universities on the list,” my mother said, “are any different than the next. All unfamiliar names and places, but he’s smoke, smoke, smoking away trying to decide. He’s lighting one up with the dying embers of the one before. His beloved cigarettes, the ones his grandfather smoked, said everything else tasted like dirt. Once, I almost killed him. We just had to go to eleven different gas stations to find his specific brand.”

My father looked down at one of the thousands of cigarette boxes and read the label.

“It read: Kent cigarettes. Your dad looks at it for a second, then shrugs and fills out the paperwork.”

As he filled out the name KENT STATE on the form, he thought, “It’s as good a place as any.”

Pure and Simple Chance

“That’s how I got your name,” Robin said, under the stars, after telling me about her and Charlie at Kent State.

I was partially confused, but mostly just happy that I hadn’t been named something like Lotto, Pick 3, or Student Center. I might have been able to live with Kent. My face must have said confused because Robin answered the question on it without my mouth having to ask.

“One of my regulars,” she said, “at the Italian restaurant I was working at asked me about you. By then I was pretty far along, I never got used to the potbelly stomach. I knocked over

plenty of wine glasses with you while serving. Anyways, I told her about you and how I met Charlie at college.”

Robin just gave the customer the basics composed of the details that made it an everyday tale of a college student getting knocked up. But my mother didn’t tell the customer about the student center job, her old dorm neighbor’s revelation about Charlie’s marital status, the canceled spring break trip to Florida, or the lottery numbers she correctly guessed.

My mother didn’t tell the regular about the Kent cigarettes.

And she sure as hell didn’t tell that woman about Charlie’s casual lunch invitation that ended up with my mother in a car parallel parked outside of an Akron abortion clinic, crying her eyes out and refusing to get out of the car.

“It’s funny how you think of your life,” she said, looking right at me. “You get all these plans in your head about how it’s supposed to be: the man you’re supposed to marry, the kind of job you deserve, and what your family will be like.”

She recalled a quote from a famous musician whose songs filled our home when I was growing up.

“He said, ‘Life is what happens while you’re busy making other plans.’ Had it absolutely right too. But when I was telling that lady about my baby that was on the way, you, it was clear: life is not a set of guarantees. Life doesn’t give a shit about who gets what.”

I thought this quality of life—how it didn’t care about fairness—and it seemed to be exactly what made people flock and love ideas like Santa Claus, courts of law (and shows like Judge Trudy).

This characteristic of life can make the idea of an all-powerful, all-knowing being who is everywhere at all times sound pretty damn good.

“You came to me,” my mother said, “not as some big fateful thing destined to happen to me. We found each other through the Kent State Student Center, the Kent cigarettes, the idiot I worked with. We found each other through pure and simple chance.”